ELIZABETH'S TOWER

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To
MY MOTHER

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CHAPTER I

Some folks believe that the wind doesn't blow as hard on the North Dakota prairies, or the cold come down as savagely as it did twenty-five or thirty years ago. It seems more logical to think that the wind comes down in its old bitter fury, but a tender young sapling in a thin green skin might feel that wind a more terrible thing than the thick old tree, with its roots fastened deep into the holding earth.

To Elizabeth, the wind seemed a malignant personal enemy as she struggled along over a new road. The frozen snow held her slight weight for a few yards, then suddenly gave way and let the plump young legs down through a crust that cut and scraped. The snow was old, and the day was cloudy, but the sunset had been torn into shreds by the winds and scattered headlong over the sky.

Elizabeth held her school-books tight against her side under the old-fashioned cape, with its plaid cowl hood. She was dressed as warmly as her elders knew how to dress a little girl late in the last century, with flannel underwear and a knitted petticoat, a good white underskirt over that, and a long-sleeved prim dress of dark wool buttoned snugly about her plump body, its small straight collar fastened tight about the throat at the

back of her neck. She wore home-knitted stockings of red and stiff hide boots, whose water-proofing liquid gave out a terrible smell in a warm room.

But she was too little and too tender to withstand the cruel blast. Tears froze on her cheeks, and the chill entered the very cockles of her heart.

She was so desperately homesick, this little one. For what? She couldn't have told. Surely not for the Orphans' Home back east that had sheltered her for two years. Sometimes now she thought of its unappreciated gifts with a pang of longing. There had been other children there and a few well-worn toys; there had been little girls who found the temerity to giggle underneath the bed-clothes; there had been the tremendous excitement of Visitor's Day, with its aftermath of tragic heart-burnings when some favored child vanished into the shelter of a warm kind home.

At last her father's older brother had made up his mind about his duty to his niece and had sent for her. In place of stern brick walls and graveled paths, the wastes of winter prairie lay all about her.

Elizabeth's imagination could encompass nothing more remote from human happiness than the neat, well-managed little house, set in the rich acres of Hiram Whittaker's wheat farm. It was a terribly lonely place to a little girl, although her Aunt Jane would have been astounded to know she thought so. For Jane Whittaker was vain of her house and her housekeeping, of her tall grandiose husband. Elizabeth felt dimly that these people were good, but their goodness was too high for her. She was so far removed from them that she seemed to live in a separate world, alone.

She breasted a slight rise. Looking up toward the west, she saw that the wind had taken great blocks and masses of the torn sunset, and with them, built a tower.

It leaned in the illumined sky, a high place of rosy clouds, with bulwarks and a turret, and on the crown a bright light, a slanting beam of sunlight striking upward from beyond the rim of the world, piercing the turret with a golden ray. All the weary, snow-burned land lay now in a sheen of rosy light.

Elizabeth stood staring.

How wonderful it would be if only she had a tower! A tower whose rocks no mighty wind could shake, a place of unassailable peace where she, and all the others out in the bitter wind, might creep and find it warm and secure; a place from which a gallant knight could ride on a shining charger. She seemed almost to see the knight on a white-cloud horse. The anticipation of adventure, of imminent happiness, warmed her.

She waved to the tower—a friendly small mitten fluttering out from the blowing cape. The house was in sight beyond the rise, lying in a little hollow with a windbreak to the north. Suddenly she wanted to be there. She had been the only pupil in the schoolhouse that bitter day. The teacher had spent the day looking longingly out of the window and idly reading stories to Elizabeth, her thoughts far from the child.

Teacher was lost, wrapped in dreams, and could hardly bring her attention to bear on the little girl with the long brown braids and the wide blue eyes who sat so quietly, so dutifully, on her hard bench. Elizabeth expected nothing more from one far too young and pretty to sit in a prairie school all day.

There was a cutter in the yard! It was not Uncle Hiram's, but a fine red sleigh, with a wind-shield that curved like the prow of a ship.

Elizabeth hurried. The Whittakers had not had company since she had been with them. The horses, she knew, were already warmly stabled in Uncle's barn, which meant company overnight.

A great plume of smoke rose from the kitchen chimney. Elizabeth had stumbled into one of Uncle Hiram's paths and walked more quickly. Her legs felt cut and bruised through the thick stockings from the sharp edges of broken-snow crust. But a pleasant little thrill of excitement and anticipation warmed her. Perhaps there would be a child—a little girl!

She pressed down the latch with her mittened hand and leaned against the kitchen door, which admitted her into the warm dusky cave of the house. Rays of red fire leaped out from chunks in the stove-lids and pierced the growing dark of the room. Aunt Jane had not yet lighted the shining lamp that hung against the kitchen wall.

A great bearded man stood by the stove warming his hands behind him. His coattails dangled perilously over the hot fire, and it seemed the very hairs on his hands would be singed. The warm air of the kitchen was full of the smell of steaming wool and thawing shoe-leather. The tangled black beard, the piercing light eyes under bushy brows, the formal thick black suit, made a sort of ogre whose loud voice lectured Uncle. But when he turned and saw Elizabeth she met eyes that twinkled, so she was instantly reassured.

"Come in, Elizabeth," said Aunt Jane's prim voice. "Don't stand there with all the northwest crowding in behind you."

Elizabeth closed the door and thereby increased the dusk, for the two east windows were thickly coated with frost.

"Take off your wraps and hang them behind the stove. Are your feet wet?"

Elizabeth advanced awkwardly, made shy by this attention before strangers. Uncle, however, at once drew the ogre's attention back to their argument, and the child, forgotten in the midst of older relationships, fumbled with stiff fingers at the fastening of her cape.

"Hi, little girl," called a voice, and a warm wave of happiness ran through Elizabeth even before she turned to look at this new speaker. She smiled at him involuntarily, a deep sweet smile, springing from forgotten places in her heart.

A young man with shaven cheeks and a small mustache sat on a stool near the east window, so that the last of the light fell on him. Judging from the length of limb folded before him, he was not as tall as the black beard, but he was slim and gallant. He wore a checkered flannel woodsman's shirt, with a red silk handkerchief knotted about his throat. His soft, fine corduroys were thrust into high-laced boots. His eyes were a blazing blue under twisted thick brows, and the smile, in answer to her unexpected little radiance, was all a gleam of shining teeth and friendly kindness. Elizabeth stood looking at him in fascination, so that Aunt Jane advanced and whisked away her wraps and sternly bade her sit down and take off her sodden shoes.

That the stool happened to be near the young visitor was great good fortune, for she would never have dared sit elsewhere. Her fingers were still stiff with cold as

she struggled with the leather thongs of her shoes. These knots were hard and always needed a fervent prayer or two before they yielded.

Elizabeth had learned that no one noticed or helped her, and she had just shut her blue eyes tightly for her customary, "Please, God, help me untie it," when a long brown hand reached down, and strong fingers plucked at the knot. In a moment the shoe was off, and Elizabeth's cold foot was snug in a warm knitted moccasin.

"Do you always have to do them alone, little darling?" whispered a voice, so loving, so compassionate, that the dam of suppressed feeling shook within her. She raised her eyes to look more closely at this new friend who had first pierced that tender place shut in upon her mother's memory.

"You see, I pray about them," she explained gravely, finding that she could speak out all her heart.

"Oh!" said the whisper, with complete comprehension. "Of course, that makes it easier. But if you were my little sister, I'd untie your shoes every night of the world, and warm your feet in my two hands."

The other shoe was off by now.

"Come here," he said, and Elizabeth went and stood beside him. He reached out an arm and enfolded her gently, drawing her closely to his side. Elizabeth felt a great fluttering and stirring in her breast. To be enfolded! To be held, again! With a sense of fulfillment her mind flashed to the rosy tower leaning in the sky.

Good Jane Whittaker knew nothing of children, and such maternal impulses as she might have held had been lost long ago in the years of her barrenness. She had fed and housed Elizabeth with that scrupulous observ-

ance of duty which ruled her life, but there had been neither kiss nor clasp for the starved little heart. And now the child leaned against a checkered shirt, shocked and undone by a casual tenderness.

"So your name's Elizabeth?" asked blue eyes and scarlet kerchief. "Elizabeth—what?"

"Elizabeth Whittaker," she whispered.

"Mine's Jim. Jim Younger. Do you like it?"

"Yes, sir."

He laughed. He flung back his head, opened his mouth, showed all the white horses that were his teeth, and filled the room with a jolly noise.

"Don't 'sir' me, young lady. I'll have none of it. Call me 'Jim,'" he commanded.

"Yes, Jim." Elizabeth laughed, too. It was delicious to laugh with him. It ran all over you in wayward, thrilling joy, and sprang from your lips like a blackbird's song.

"Elizabeth," said Aunt Jane, "come away. You're bothering Mr. Younger."

"Indeed, she's not, ma'am," protested Jim. "I was never yet bothered by a pretty girl."

The bearded ogre glanced at him and smiled, but neither Uncle Hiram nor Aunt Jane was amused. Elizabeth could not endure the thought of withdrawing from this warm heart.

"Mr. Younger asked me," she offered timidly, in justification of her lingering, and the ogre laughed.

"I thought you were going to call me Jim," teased Mr. Younger.

Elizabeth smiled at him, the smile that her aunt and uncle had never seen, a deep lingering glow of sweetness

that lighted the small round face and deepened the wide blue eyes into beauty. Jim Youngr lifted her on to his knees and held her there, her feet cupped in one hand, his arm about her.

"Such little feet, to walk on frozen snow!" he exclaimed. The others were talking now—some dreary abstraction about the possibility of a presidential proclamation to open the Indian reservation. Elizabeth leaned against the checkered shirt and confided soberly:

"The crust breaks."

"And hurts your shins?"

She nodded. She sighed profoundly and looked up at him. "Could you stay here?" she asked, "forever?"

He did not smile, but took the question quite seriously.

"I'm afraid not, little Elizabeth. I have work to do. I have to go with my brother and help him. Besides, your aunt and uncle wouldn't want me to stay. But I'll be your friend. You can always count on me for your own big brother. If I remember you, and you remember me, won't that do?"

"Yes," said Elizabeth politely, but she was disappointed.

"Isn't that your father?" she asked him after a moment, thinking of what he had said and looking at the big man still singeing his coattails over the fire. Jim laughed again. He was always laughing, it seemed, but she did not mind his jokes at all. He could laugh at her forever, if he liked.

"No," said Jim, still grinning and twinkling and looking at black beard with great relish. "He's my brother. I have seven of them."

"Seven!" Elizabeth was aghast. "But I didn't know anybody could have seven brothers—and such an old one!"

This was too much for Jim, and he foolishly repeated her little confidences aloud. The older Younger laughed, a coarse guffaw. But Aunt Jane was displeased. She rose and lighted the lamp, its golden rays altering all the lines and contours of the room.

"Come and set the table for supper, Elizabeth," she said, in a low rebuking tone. "It is not seemly for little girls to be so familiar."

Jim Younger gave Elizabeth a little squeeze and put her on the floor. She went soberly to the duty she had been given, reaching high into the black maw of the cupboard for the great white cups, taking the pewter spoons and steel knives, with their horn handles, from the cupboard drawer. She was marvelously happy. She turned at times and smiled at those blue eyes watching her so steadily. It was a brown comely face. A lock of thick dark hair fell down on the forehead; the aquiline nose, the pleasant mouth, a square chin marked with a deep dimple, below it. So long as he was in the room, she knew she would be happy feeling the strong magnetism of his kindness. There was about her an ineffable content. Her very limbs moved lightly. It was marvelous how she had changed in an hour. She was no longer homesick. She would never hate this little house again, or find it cold and strange. The long-endured isolation of her child's heart was gone, lost in the contact she had made.

When they had eaten and the two Youngers had wiped their mouths with their handkerchiefs, the men

pushed the chairs back from the table for serious talk. Elizabeth cleared away and washed the dishes, splashing them about in the great pan of hot water, just as Aunt Jane had taught her. She felt herself very grown up and capable in the changed atmosphere about her.

This chore done, it was not quite time for bed. Uncle had been out for a last round of the farm buildings, and for fresh water from the pump. Aunt Jane sat in her rocker near the fire with the tube of unfinished sock in her hands. The steel knitting-needles twinkled brightly in the lamplight and Elizabeth felt, for the first time, a drawing of the spirit toward her aunt. She went and stood timidly beside her.

"You make such beautiful socks, Aunt Jane!" she said softly. She had been in this house now for over a month, obeying to her full capacity all that was asked of her, and keeping that silence she was told to keep the night she came, but she was still a stranger in the house, a silent ghost of childhood.

"Your hair's so pretty, too," she added, with a little sigh. It was, perhaps, the most fortunate thing she could have said, for Aunt Jane had never been able to overcome her personal vanity in the thick sleek locks, coiled and piled so neatly on her tall head. She looked up at the child now, a little surprised and embarrassed.

"When I grow up," quavered the treble voice, "I should like to have hair like yours." Elizabeth's heart was so warm she could not stop. "But I should like to have a smile like my mamma's."

Aunt Jane's needles paused. She turned and looked full at the child.

"Your hair will be like mine, but prettier. Mine was

just such a brown when I was a little girl, but it never showed any sign of curl, as your does."

They were silent a moment, Aunt Jane looking down at her knitting, Elizabeth leaning more daringly against her arm.

"Do you still remember your mamma?"

"Oh, yes," said Elizabeth eagerly. "I was nearly nine when—she died. She was pretty, Aunt Jane. She had a new hat with blue feathers on it—she was trying it on to show daddy that day they brought him home from the train wreck. She never put it on again, she never went anywhere, but just stayed in the house. And then she had a little baby, and it died, and mamma couldn't get well. She—" but the child failed in this sustained effort. It was so difficult to talk about mamma!

She gazed at Aunt Jane beseechingly. Why was it so far from heart to heart? But to-night Elizabeth was brave, driven by a desperate impulse, as though she must accomplish this journey into Aunt Jane's affection now, or she would never make it. Another timid step brought her leaning against Aunt Jane's hard breast, close to the virtuous gray eyes behind their gleaming spectacles.

"Am I always to live here, Aunt Jane?" she asked.

"As long as you are a good girl," was the answer, spoken in a low voice that shut them off from the men's rough contention.

This was discouraging, but Elizabeth pressed on.

"It would seem more like my mamma's home if I might kiss you," she said, and stopped, appalled at her temerity. Aunt Jane flushed a little, then yielding to an impulse whose slight manifestation showed only a mite of the havoc wrought within, she leaned her cheek sharp-

ly toward Elizabeth and felt the soft and silken pressure of the child's lips.

She picked up her knitting-needles and began working rapidly on the sock, knit and purl, knit and purl, while Elizabeth leaned against her, her eyes tightly closed.

Next time Aunt Jane would be better. Elizabeth would show her how to love!

How Jim Younger's coming had changed the whole world!

Leaning securely against that arm, which had grown perceptibly softer, more hospitable, Elizabeth looked at him sitting with the men, his chin thrust forward, his brows drawn down in argument. How wonderful he was! He would, in later life, be a broad-shouldered swaggering man, a little shorter than others, but now, to her child mind, he was giant, prince and hero.

For he had been kind to her. She had felt the courage and warmth of his heart, and had drawn comfort from it. Now, although he could not stay with her, he would not leave her alone again! She did not reason out all these things, but she knew them, as wise children always know the truth, without process of thought.

After a little the clock on top of the cupboard sounded eight in its important manner, and Aunt Jane, without looking up from her knitting, said:

"You must go to bed, Elizabeth."

"Yes, dear Aunt Jane," answered the child. She went to the shelf, took her candle and brought it to light at the fire.

"Say good night to the gentlemen," said Aunt Jane softly, and Elizabeth felt her aunt's loyalty, as women

standing together against men. She put her candle on the corner of the kitchen table and walked gravely across the room.

"Good night, sir," she said to the vociferous black beard.

He did not hear her at first, but his brother drew his attention by kicking him on the ankle. He turned in astonishment.

"Good night, my dear Miss Whittaker," he said, and bowed low to Elizabeth, offering her his hand. She was overcome with confusion, sensing dimly a mockery she could not meet. She could hardly bring herself to put her plump little fist in his great horny palm, but she did, and felt her hand shaken and heard herself advised to "be a good girl." At last he let go of her, and she turned unsteadily to her uncle, keeping the last for the best.

"Good night, Uncle Hiram."

He answered quickly, "Good night, Elizabeth," and turned back to his guests.

Elizabeth turned to Jim, still sitting on the stool.

"Good night, Mr. Younger."

He reached out for her little hands and held them in his own, his eyes looking at her steadfastly.

"Say it as I told you," he teased, and she smiled.

"Good night, Jim. Angels guard you." It was what her mother had always said to her.

He answered with his gleaming smile, "They will, if *you* ask them," and drew her between his knees. "Kiss me good night, or I shall not sleep a wink."

Elizabeth knew this was nonsense, but she laughed, lifted her face and kissed him warmly.

"You're a sweet thing. I'm going to send you a doll when we get to Coal City."

"Oh, thank you!"

"Every night," he told her, "before you go to bed, put out your candle, look at the stars and say to yourself, 'I have a friend called Jim Younger, and I'll never be lonely again, because he'll always help me if I need him.'"

Elizabeth sighed from a full heart. He knew she had been lonely! He knew everything!

"Thank you. I shall remember." She left him, lit her candle and went alone up the stairs, treasuring as pure gold the untried metal of his careless kindness.

The stars shone brightly over the winter world. She felt quite wicked after she had said the prayers she had been taught, because she had knelt and said them before she undressed; but the loft was cold and perhaps God would excuse her. She took off her clothes with lightning rapidity and pulled a thick brown nightgown over her head. Then, in bare feet, the smoking candle in her hand, she went and looked from her narrow window at the great globes of the stars, and said soberly the formula he had taught her:

"I have a friend called Jim Younger, and I'll never be lonely again, 'cause he'll always help me if I need him."

The years would pass, but she would never forget.

CHAPTER II

ELIZABETH came down-stairs to find Aunt Jane alone in the kitchen. The men were out-of-doors, and the remains of their early breakfast stood on the table.

"Mr. Younger and his brother are going your way and will drop you at the schoolhouse and save you the walk, Elizabeth," said Aunt Jane. "So there's plenty of time." She was making sandwiches at the cupboard. Elizabeth unbraided her hair and brushed it.

"They're kind to take me," she said, sitting down on her stool. Aunt Jane braided the soft brown curls into two tight bristling braids, then tied each braid up against the child's head in a silken loop.

But Aunt Jane did not approve of the Youngers and said so, as her hands worked swiftly.

"A bad lot," she told her little niece. "They're a wild wicked lot of men—not a good man among them. Their mother was a fine woman, but she had no chance with the boys at all. The father, old Hal Younger, came from good stock back East, but he grew up in the old West and wanted all his boys to be roistering men, and they are! They're smart and capable enough, and popular, too. But they're not fit company for decent women."

"Oh, not Jim. He's good, I know it," protested Elizabeth, but Aunt Jane was very positive. She even laughed sharply at the child's innocent faith.

"He's not good at all," she answered definitely. "He's handsome enough, as all the Younger boys were before they became coarsened by the lives they lead. He's kind to every one, just as he was to you. I've heard it said he could drink more whisky than any man of his age in the state. They pride themselves on such accomplishments, the Youngers do, on drinking and fighting and things wise men avoid. No, he's not a good man. It gave me a chill—to see you so familiar with him—a man who spent six months of last year in prison for fighting and almost killing another."

"But you fed him—you had him here all night—" Elizabeth's small mouth was open in amazement. Her braids were finished, but she did not move from the stool, looking at Aunt Jane with such confusion and pain that the older woman explained.

"There are some things a person has to do—and on the prairies in the winter, you can't refuse shelter, not even to your enemies. There's no other place near, and it was coming dark and bitter cold. Even the heathen have strict laws of hospitality, Elizabeth, and surely a Christian could not refuse any man or beast shelter in a prairie winter. But I'd not have them here again if I thought you'd be influenced by them—vipers!" she exclaimed, with sudden passion.

She placed Elizabeth's breakfast on the table, but the child could not eat a bite. Aunt Jane was the kind of person who never told a lie.

"It's a mistake. It was somebody else—maybe one of the other brothers!" she decided then, and felt a great relief. Her appetite came back to her, and she gave Aunt Jane a twinkling smile. Of course it was a mistake! The blood flowed warm about her frightened heart.

She was too polite, however, to point out this obvious error to Aunt Jane. It was not becoming for little girls to contradict their elders. But secretly she was complacent.

The men came in.

"Good morning," said Elizabeth politely. The big one, wrapped now to the ears in his great fur coat, did not answer. He and Uncle Hiram were angry, talking to each other so rapidly that Elizabeth could make no sense of their words. Uncle Hiram refused loudly to sign some sort of a paper—a petition to the President. Elizabeth made no effort to discover the mystery, only shrinking a little as children do, when the thunder and lightning of a grown-up quarrel smites the family life.

Jim came and sat down beside her. He took the red-silk handkerchief from his pocket and untied it to bind it about his neck, but first he rolled it up into a funnel, turned the ends back and tied a knot or two, so that it looked just like a little red pig without legs. He began to do tricks with this, making it leap from his palm, come out of his cuff, out of his ears and the back of his head. He did not say a word or even smile, but he sat beside her and was a magician, while she stared and stared, her small mouth open in amazement.

Her eyes were too slow for his swift hands. She was willing to credit him with supernal powers. Her heart swelled with relief. He a prisoner? No. He was very good and wonderful. He was almost as good as her mother, and nearly as wonderful as God.

She discovered that Aunt Jane was signaling for her to hurry, so she jumped down from the table and went to get her wraps, while the men did the last preliminary chores.

Aunt Jane stood Elizabeth on a chair this morning and wrapped an old knitted muffler of her own about the child's chest, bringing it back under the arms, and tying it behind before she put the big cape on, so that Elizabeth looked like a humped little gnome, except for the sweet face shining out from the red-wool hood. Finding herself on a level with her aunt, Elizabeth reached out an arm from under the cape and encircled the other's neck.

"Good-by, Aunt Jane," she said, and kissed her aunt on the lips. Aunt Jane gave her a tight hug and put her on the floor, her plain long face illumined with a smile.

Then they were all in the cutter, Elizabeth with her lunch-box, on Jim's knees, Hal Younger driving, the fur robes piled upon them all. The horses were draft animals, whose great haunches loomed enormously over the prow of the ship-cutter. They leaped away at the touch of the whip and turned on to the road, flying like the wind under the black beard's hard hand. His mouth was drawn down fiercely, his eyes, light and cold with anger, on the team.

"Hiram Whittaker is a fool—a fool and a prohibitionist," he exclaimed to his brother. He spat the word, which Elizabeth had never heard before, from his mouth as though it were something vile. "He can't see the good of the state for his own little interests, can't brace himself for a year or two to bring in all that money—the railroad, the crops and the towns—of all the infernal complacency I ever saw— I tell you, I'm sickened with it. Get that flask from my pocket, Jim, I'm perishing."

Elizabeth had shrunk against Jim, making herself as small as possible in the circle of his arm under the bear

skin. He patted her, a reassuring touch, and spoke to his brother quietly.

"Easy does it. We'll drop the mite in a mile or two. No sense adding further insult. The wee one's not to blame."

The other grumbled, but made no further comment. He did not even look at Elizabeth when he finally drew his plunging horses to a halt by the schoolhouse. Jim pushed Elizabeth aside with the robes and got down from the cutter first. He lifted her down in his arms and carried her across to the schoolhouse door.

Teacher was making the fire, shivering over the cold stove, a woolen "comforter" pulled tightly about her warm dress. She looked up, a handsome, buoyant young woman, disgusted with school-teaching. At sight of Elizabeth in Jim's arms she smiled radiantly.

"Why, Mr. Younger!" she cried in a flutter. Her manner was agitated, affected. She came forward as he put Elizabeth down and offered her hand, held high. Jim Younger snatched his fur hat from his head. His manner was cajoling, and he laughed.

"So this is where you've hidden yourself this winter?" he exclaimed, lifting his hand to meet hers, so that their clasp appeared very elegant indeed to Elizabeth, who was staring roundly.

"I met Joe Mock in Coal City last month, and I asked him where Annie Smail was these days, and he said that you'd thrown him over, and that he was going to marry a rich widow to spite you."

Teacher screamed and gave Mr. Younger a playful push, so that he reached out a hand and caught her to save himself from falling.

"Oh, Mr. Younger!" She was shrieking with laughter. "Oh, aren't you bad! I know you never saw Mr. Mock at all! He was expecting to be made county school-supervisor. Was he? Do you know?"

"Elections are next month, Miss Smail, but of course you wouldn't know. I must go. My brother hates to keep a team standing on the road. Take care of my little friend, Elizabeth, will you?"

"Of course," said Teacher, drawing Elizabeth fondly to her. "She's my best pupil—the nicest child in the school. Oh, if they were only all like Elizabeth, Mr. Younger!"

"Well, you'll not teach school another winter, I wager," said Jim with a broad grin and a wink, and Teacher screamed again. Then Jim stooped, and put an arm about Elizabeth's shoulders. All the nonsense was suddenly gone from him. He looked at her as though he feared to leave her, as though he longed to take her with him. With a faint movement of tenderness, she pressed her cheek against his.

"Good-by, Jim!" she whispered.

"Good-by. Watch for your new dollie," he whispered back, and then still kneeling on the floor, he looked up at Teacher.

"Be good to her, Annie," he implored. "The cards are stacked against her."

CHAPTER III

THE days passed happily. Even Uncle Hiram seemed changed, yielding to the child's persistent wooing. For Elizabeth now felt it in her power to draw every one into her swelling heart. Twice Uncle relented and let her stay home from school when the wind howled across the plains, with a blizzard in its threat. Twice he hitched up and drove her the two miles to school and returned later, in the bitter cold, to fetch her.

The child grew heartier. Warmed and sustained by that last good-by kiss from Auntie—now a matter of ritual—anticipating all the way home from school each night's breathless entrance into the dusky kitchen, always with the sense of Jim's being there in the corner, his smile flashing at her above the scarlet neckerchief.

School was better now that she was Teacher's pet,—another miracle achieved by a mere word from him. Sometimes Teacher kept Elizabeth after school a few moments and let her clean the boards or gather up the arithmetic papers, while she asked questions about Mr. Younger. At home she and Aunt Jane had slipped into the casual tenderness of two women of whatever age, housed and held together. In spite of her growing affection, Elizabeth had come to discount her aunt's opinions. There had been the dreadful mistake about Jim Younger. And now, Elizabeth found, Aunt Jane would not take Teacher to board.

"She's a flighty thing, that Annie Smail. She only got the school because she made eyes at the trustees. I've known her since she was a little girl, rolling her eyes in the country church. Brought up in poverty and looking for a rich husband. She's hysterical, that's what she is!"

"She's awfully good to me. I like her." Elizabeth was staunch.

The child walked across the kitchen, her small skirts twitching behind her, her hand held high in the air.

"How do you do, Mrs. Whittaker!" she cried in an affected squeal.

Aunt Jane stared severely at her, but Elizabeth went on about the kitchen—her body thrust forward at the waist, her head jerking on its neck like a chicken's.

"That's the way Teacher says 'hello,' " she exclaimed with pride. "I've been practising it. Can't I do it nice?"

"Say nicely." Aunt Jane was stubbornly silent about this parade of social gifts. She was also determined that the child should have what few advantages she could give her—the faultless speech of a New England schoolteacher, the gentle manners of her own people.

Aunt Jane gave Elizabeth some bits of silk. After considerable mental effort and consultation with Teacher, it was decided to make a pen-wiper for Uncle Hiram for a Christmas gift. Aunt Jane felt that a silk pen-wiper would be an impractical affair, but so far had she advanced in understanding that she not only withheld this opinion, but even primed her husband, in private, for a proper reception of the gift.

Uncle Hiram was harassed and worried about the possibility of the opening of the Indian country. Teacher

had told them all about it. Every one hoped it would be done, except Uncle Hiram, who was bitterly opposed to it and prophesied untold disaster. Perhaps, Elizabeth reasoned, if he had a pen-wiper, he would write a letter to the President and stop all this nonsense. Auntie had found a real pearly button with which the circles of silk could be fastened together.

Elizabeth had a brooch—a pink pearl, set in scrolls of greenish gold. It had been her mother's, and she considered it the last word in expensive and artistic jewelry. She looked at it every night, and though it was all she had to give Aunt Jane, she could hardly bear to give it away, she had so little that had been her lovely mother's. Yet something kept urging her on.

The Saturday before Christmas, Uncle Hiram hitched up and drove to town to get the mail and buy supplies. He came in, late in the afternoon, his arms full of bundles, his face black with rage. As he flung the bags and bundles down on the table, a long, rectangular box rolled a little away from the other things.

"They've done it!" he cried out, and turned and stamped about the kitchen, his flaxen beard beaded with drops of ice, his great fur hat still on his head, his body huge and grotesque in the big coat.

"I met Hal Younger on the street in town. That upstart, Jim, was with him. They tell me it is practically settled that the Indian reservation is to be opened in the spring. Younger has been to Washington, himself, to see the President. Imagine such effrontery!"

He flung his arms about and Elizabeth, who found him always full of ponderous self-righteousness, was now frightened by his anger.

"You must be calm," Aunt Jane said in her firm quiet voice. "You do yourself great harm by such excitement. Remember, you are not able to stand it."

Uncle Hiram reached up between the lapels of his coat and tore open his shirt collar. His face was red, swollen. He paid no attention to her admonition, but went on as though he had been thinking all these things as he drove, and must out with them, regardless of consequences.

"If I'd known this was possible, I'd have sold out to Bradwell last year. He offered me a good price. Now the land won't be worth the deed and title, the crops will be worth nothing. Think of the wheat they'll raise on that new land—it will be impossible to get a hand for seeding. The wheat futures are down already. I tell you, Jane, we are ruined."

"Don't feel badly, Hiram. We are strong. We can start again. God's will be—"

"Don't prate God's will at me!" he cried, and Elizabeth drew near her aunt, fearing that Uncle would strike her, he was so beside himself. "Do you think it's God's will to rob and crowd the Redmen? I tell you, we are paupers. The very rumor of such a thing will ruin me, even if it is never perpetrated."

All the peace and comfort of the long busy day was shattered. The great, inflamed face, the wild, violent-light eyes seemed to swim over Elizabeth in the startled silence that followed his words, ringing with a sense of alarm and threat.

"Your team," said Aunt Jane, and Uncle came back to some measure of sanity. He looked at her angrily, and held himself erect for a moment, his great height,

his proud big-featured face condemning her for her lack of sympathy and excitement. Then he marched out, the house shaking in the blast of the slammed door.

"Aunt Jane," said Elizabeth timidly, "wasn't our farm once Indian land? Teacher told us a wigwam might have been on this very spot."

Aunt Jane sighed and stroked the child's soft brown hair.

"You must not say that to your Uncle Hiram, Elizabeth. You see, he has worked many years to build up this farm, and now he feels it will be worthless. It prejudices his judgments. It's a bitter disappointment, and no easier to bear that he feels the Younger brothers are responsible. He hates them so. They are all traders, and they will grow rich from the new immigrants in the state. Mr. Younger says that some day the land here will be worth fifty or seventy-five dollars an acre, but that's ridiculous. However, little girls can't understand these things. Uncle will feel better when he's fed his horses and rubbed them down."

She began to sort out the parcels on the table, although she seemed not to see them. She sighed, and Elizabeth admired her. Hadn't *she* worked for the farm, too? Wouldn't *she* be poor, if Uncle lost it all? Auntie was brave. Elizabeth resolved, with a lump in her throat, that she would care for them both. And all at once she knew that she would give her aunt the pink pearl pin, freely now, with no withholding thought.

Aunt Jane stood with the long box in her hands, staring in a troubled way out of the window that gave a view of the barn. Elizabeth peeked at the package and felt a pleasant sense of shock.

"Why, Aunt Jane, it's addressed to me. May I have it, please?"

Aunt Jane came out of her abstraction a little, adjusted her glasses and peered at the package, which was plastered thickly with stamps. The address was written with great flourishes.

"Take it," she said mechanically. She did not seem to be able to think of what she was doing, and Elizabeth took the box. She ran to the cupboard for the scissors and cut the heavy cord away. Her hands were trembling, her heart beating high with excitement. She unfolded the stiff paper and found a white cardboard box within. Under the lid was crushed white-tissue paper. Elizabeth pulled it away and stood, her hands clasped together, in speechless adoration.

The doll must have been eighteen inches tall, with a body of white kid, and a fine bisque face with yellow curls all about its brow. The blue eyes had really truly eyelashes. A dress of red merino bound with rows and rows of black braid, clothed the lovely form. There were short white stockings on the kid legs and small patent-leather slippers on the little black piano-key feet.

Elizabeth at last found strength to pluck at Aunt Jane's apron.

"Look," she breathed, and Aunt Jane, who all this time had been staring forlornly out of the window, glanced at the child, then sharply at the doll. She threw her hands above her head in astonishment.

"Such a doll!" she cried. "Why, Elizabeth, whoever would give you such a doll?"

Elizabeth knew exactly. Hadn't he promised? But she only said:

"Maybe there's a letter."

She reached for the doll but found that it was tied by the arms to the bottom of the box. She got it loose at last and lifted it free of the white-paper wrappings. In the bottom of the box was a card. Engraved on it, in a fine scroll, was,

James L. Younger

and below, the written words,

"To the bravest little girl I ever knew, I send a playmate, to remind her of the friend who couldn't stay."

"Mr. Younger!" cried Aunt Jane, in a shocked voice, and then, looking swiftly behind her, she seized the card and thrust it into Elizabeth's apron pocket. Her stern face broke and wavered. It was many years before Elizabeth was able to appreciate the vehement love that made her aunt's decision possible. She stooped over the child.

"Darling, darling—your uncle will not let you keep the lovely doll if he knows Mr. Younger sent it. We must say there wasn't any card. Play with it quietly, and he may never notice. It seems a wrong thing, but we'll have to do it. Take your doll, go sit in your corner before he comes in." Her voice was warm and rough, imperative.

Elizabeth seized the doll in a passionate embrace. She could feel the many little pearl buttons that fastened the beautiful red dress.

She did not speak, but ran to her corner and sat, the doll clasped in her arms, a small valiant figure. Aunt

Jane seized the box and its wrappings, and put them into the fire, thrusting down the stiff cover and putting the lid hastily in place.

Elizabeth, in the silent moments that followed, passed into a dream.

This was the stool where she had sat beside him!

Here was the very spot where he had promised her the doll, and now she held it tightly to her heart, and Auntie would not let any one take it from her. She released her hold to look at the doll more fully, to turn it about. Everything was forgotten in ecstasy. The dress fastened clear to the hem with the small bright buttons, and the doll was fully clothed in under-garments like her own.

Aunt Jane had moved back to the window and stood there now, staring out into the black night. She had lighted the lamp in its holder, but Elizabeth was unaware of the light or of her aunt. She had begun that most exciting affair of undressing the doll. The moments passed in charmed silence. Every garment was smoothed out and another removed, until she came at last to the snowy kid body, the arms jointed at shoulder and elbow, the limbs hinged at the hip and the knee. She passed her hands gently over the smooth cool surface, then, with grave importance, she dressed her again.

"I think I'll go to the barn. I can't understand why your uncle doesn't come in." Aunt Jane picked up her shawl, threw it over her head, and went out into a whirl of new snow.

Elizabeth did not notice, but went on with her playing. She rocked the doll in her arms, crooning her mother's old song:

Bye Baby-Bunting,
Daddy's gone a-hunting!

The door flew open, and Aunt Jane came blindly into the kitchen. She carried a lantern in her hand. The shawl had fallen from her head and hung half-way down her shoulders. Her hair was covered with snowflakes, and her eyes were as wild as the storm that swept into the kitchen after her, buffeting her skirts about her unheeding body.

Elizabeth sprang up with a cry, her doll clasped tightly in some deep primal fear. For a moment they looked at each other, these two, and Aunt Jane seemed to realize how little and tender the child was. With a great effort she controlled herself and spoke in her quiet voice:

"Put down your doll and get your cape. You will have to help me. Your uncle has fallen in the snow as he left the barn. It's his weak heart and this terrible anger. Oh, Elizabeth, I know he is dead—dead!"

CHAPTER IV

SPRING came suddenly. One day there was the same old winter weather, cold and harsh. But in the night there came a sweet wind, wooing, sighing and singing all along the snow-clad fields, mourning under the eaves. Elizabeth in the loft, threw back the top cover and turned and sighed in her sleep.

The road to school was soft the next day, and between going and coming home again, great patches of marvelous green appeared in the fields.

Elizabeth stared and stared at the giddy green of the grass that leaped to sight, living, succulent. Somewhere within the child, stirred the first sweet glimpse of immortality. The earth had been dead and barren, a cruel waste, and now she saw that all the time it had breathed and waited, all-wise, for the spring. Her cheeks shone rosy with the excitement of such a thought.

She thought of Uncle lying dead on the kitchen floor that dreadful night, when Auntie had lit all the lamps and left the child alone while she went over the dark cold road for help.

It was the first time her thought had been able to dwell without fright on that stark figure. She lingered on the road, watching the sky, filling her nostrils with the rich fragrant warmth of the wind, thinking, thinking, of Uncle. She remembered now, without the old horror, that dash out into the snow with Auntie and the

lantern—the struggle with the stone-boat, and how hard it was for them to lift Uncle on to it, and then, the struggle again at the house to get him indoors. He was so big and heavy, and Auntie was not able to lift him from the floor. So she had covered him then, and with fierce, whispered directions to Elizabeth as to what to do if he should stir, she had reluctantly, but of necessity, left the child alone.

Elizabeth could not see herself now as she would in later years, a small tearful girl in a wool school-dress and pigtails, a doll clasped tightly in her arms, the little girl pressing against the window, scraping, scraping at the frosted pane to keep a little hole open so that she might see out-of-doors. The snow had stopped, and a boisterous wind blew the clouds about the sky, showing and hiding and showing again the stars. The child had clung to them and to the friendly contact of her little doll.

She had known he was dead, that he would never move or speak again, and loss of life had frightened her. But she had had resources of her own. She remembered the tower that leaned in the western sky that night she had come home from school and found Jim Younger here. She thought of it deeply, her mind fixed upon it with determination. A tower, with warm walls, all unshakable, and with a little secret door close against the ground where she might enter and climb, and climb, up to the safety and the light that glittered above.

A childish phantasy, yet more. Untutored, simple, good, she was reaching out to the very founts of courage.

The hours had passed for her without the disaster of moral collapse. Auntie had returned with a neighbor and his wife, while their son had gone on for a doctor. But

Uncle had no need of doctors, and Elizabeth had been sent to bed. Late in the night arms had lifted her, and she had wakened to find herself in her auntie's big bed, built like a box with strong legs holding it from the floor, the box filled with the odorous cleanliness of a fresh straw-tick.

The winter that followed had been a confusion of darkness and her small persistent efforts to pierce the cloudy pain that enthralled them. She had intuitively avoided speaking of the tragedy to Auntie. Yet now she could think of it in the presence of the singing grass. She could even remember how they had built fires to thaw the ground for his grave. How queer that was, when all the time the ground was living, waiting.

A wonderful release made her spring lightly forward. She hopped across the puddles of melting mud like a small robin on a lawn. She burst into the kitchen with a shout.

"It's spring, Aunt Jane! And all the grass is green! The snow's gone on the north side of the road, and the ice on the lake is covered with water so that the children on the other side can't walk across."

"I know," said Auntie, "it's the Chinook. It comes like that here—so quickly. It'll stay like this and rain until the ground is soft, and then the sun will shine as hot as if it were already summer. I'll be glad to see the fields and flowers again."

They kissed each other, and Elizabeth felt in the other a freshening spring of grief, changing, like the season, from the harsh frozen despair of winter to the healing gush of tears and wailing that was spring.

She busied herself at the cupboard, hunting for bread

and butter, gossiping about her day at school. It was a trick her loving heart had taught her, so that the silent child had become a chatterbox, searching her day for interesting news to bring the saddened woman.

Aunt Jane clung to her, listened to her, watched for her. Elizabeth went with her at chore time to help milk and feed. She could not really give much help, except her companionship. How much that was, she had no idea, giving out of her tender impulses, without stint or measure, from a wealthy store of love.

They ate their supper in the early dusk, sitting opposite each other at the oilcloth-covered table. The windows were all clear of frost, and the night coming on was dark and heavy with smells. The cows had been restless at feeding time, and old Moll had tried to push past Aunt Jane to the open door of the cow-shed, but she had been tied again, securely.

"We've got to make plans, Elizabeth," said Aunt Jane. "I've been thinking about things all day, about what's best for us to do, all around. It was easy to plan, with Uncle here, but now we've got to decide what to do."

Elizabeth waited with a delicious sense of importance, of deliberation.

"We've stayed here this winter because I could think of nothing else to do. But it's spring now. What shall we do, niece? Shall we stay on the farm? I have some money for wages for a man, and there's some fine seed in the bins—your uncle cleaned it all last fall. It will be hard, with just one man, and it's a chance I take of losing more money."

She paused to sip at her cup of tea and think, then went on again, the round-eyed child listening intently.

"We could sell the farm or rent it, maybe, but that'll be hard to do, now the new land's opening. Or, we could just leave it for a year or two until things straighten up and go in to Coal City to live. But I'm afraid my money'd run out—and besides, I don't feel reconciled to leaving the farm—yet. I suppose I could get some work, but I've never worked except in my own home, in my life. I wouldn't go to Waynesville, for the Youngers are there—Hal, and the profligate, Jim. But Coal City is a strange place to me—"

"Aunt Jane," said Elizabeth, passing over the stirring of her own heart at the talk of Jim Younger (she did not know what a profligate was, but the word had an elegant sound), "you can't go to work in any one's house. You're too proud, you know you couldn't bear it. Let's stay here with uncle. Think how badly he'd feel if you left the farm. School will soon be out. I'm past twelve, now. I can do all the housework, and if you need help out-of-doors, I know I'll soon be able to drive a team. I'm little, but I'm strong. I can do as much as a boy."

Aunt Jane's face lit with a faint smile. She looked at the small chubby figure with tender amusement.

"Maybe we could do it," she said wistfully, and Elizabeth knew it was what she wanted. She must furnish arguments to uphold her aunt's desire, and she did it with eloquence. So it was decided, with a considerable degree of excitement, to go the next day, which was Saturday, into Waynesville, to get a hired man.

It was a week before they got to Waynesville, for the heavy rains came down that night, steaming and smoking on the flanks of the earth, running in a torrent down the creek bed to the lake, making the road a river of mud.

Hiram Whittaker's farm was a beautiful one, blessed with more slopes and hollows than any farm near by. All the land ran down a gentle incline to the shore of the little lake. There were trees along the lane, and the stock, going down to the water to drink, kept a place all churned and muddy behind the big barn. There was a fenced pasture and plenty of stock, hogs, cattle and six good horses.

It was a good farm, raising grain and hay, and pasturing livestock. But it was not a farm to be handled easily by a woman nearing sixty, never accustomed to heavy work, and a plump little girl, however earnest.

CHAPTER V

They reached Waynesville, the horses and wagon spattered with mud. It was good black soil, turning gray as it dried, in lumps, and although it was so rich and heavy, nobody wanted quite so much of it, Aunt Jane said, for personal adornment. They tied up the team by the court-house and started out on the search about the little town. Elizabeth had never been there before.

There was only one elevator in Waynesville then, and the railroad was a single-track affair. The bank was not of red brick, as it is now, nor was there a consolidated grammar and high-school to shine resplendent in the prairie sunlight, no paved roads and no motor-busses for the school-children. Pigs still ran in the streets in the nineties, and cows were tied out in vacant lots. The houses were of lumber, cut and sawed many miles away, only a few being painted. The railroad station was a shed, no more. It was a small, nondescript town, but of importance to the farmers of the district. There was a good hardware and implement business, which had fallen entirely into the hands of the youngest son of old Hal Younger. There was a post-office, a land-clerk's office, a bank and two general stores. There were, also, places where whisky could be bought. Such places needed no signs hung out to draw men to this trade.

Elizabeth gazed with astonishment on the activity about her, wondering what every one was doing. Teams

stood all along the "hitch-in-rail." Buggies and farm wagons and saddled mares were tied side by side.

Aunt Jane took Elizabeth with her to the bank, where she asked young Mr. Swain if he could tell her where to get a hired man.

He laughed.

"It can't be done, Mrs. Whittaker. I'm sorry. You know what the situation is here. There's not an extra man in Wayne County, unless it might be one of Sigurd Holton's. But even he is having a hard time to get his seed in."

They went to the post-office. Elizabeth sensed, hearing the name again and again, that Sigurd Holton was some one mighty. If he couldn't get help, it was not to be had by folks like themselves. The land-clerk's office, the general stores, yielded them nothing. They returned to the wagon and ate their lunch of sandwiches and cold coffee.

"You stay here, Elizabeth. I'll go see if I can find any of Uncle's friends to help me out." Elizabeth sat alone on the high spring-seat of the wagon, her legs dangling into the air, her eyes wide to regard the world, a dingy prairie town, but to her, commerce and adventure, the marts of trade.

"Look at me, Elizabeth," coaxed a soft voice, and Elizabeth with a leap of her heart, turned to stare into Jim Younger's face on a level with her own. Her eyes widened, her face lit with a smile. It was a moment before she comprehended that he was standing on the hub of the wagon-wheel, leaning against the side of the seat. The whole blue spring sky was background for him. He wore a Stetson hat, pushed back so that an unruly lock

of hair fell down on his forehead. His eyes under the tufted twisted brows were as blue as the sky, as blue as the first crocuses. He was young, young, with smooth bronze cheeks and a mouth made for smiling.

She flung her arms about his neck with uncontrollable affection.

"Oh, Jim!" she cried, and kissed him.

His hat fell from his head, and he laughed aloud. Oh, she had not forgotten that frank, lively shout, like the banging, buffeting wind that made one feel so wild and free.

"I've been watching for a chance to speak to you since you hitched up here. I didn't want to bother your aunt—she's got a feeling against us, from what I hear."

"It's just Uncle dying so," she explained gently.

"I know," he said. "I know how she feels. Don't blame her a bit. Plenty of folks hate the Youngers." He said it with a kind of pride. "But that couldn't keep me away from my little Elizabeth."

"Oh, Jim, I'm so glad you came over. It's been a long time, but I've never forgotten what you told me. Remember—about the stars?"

"Sure," he said, with a vague puzzled look. "Sure, I remember. Don't you ever forget anything I tell you."

"Oh, I won't," she cried, "and thanks for my doll. I love it so. It's my only chum, and I take good care of it. Thanks, Jim—"

"That's all right, baby. You keep that doll, and it will tell you every day that Jim loves you. What are you doing in town?"

"Auntie came in for a man. She has to have somebody to do the heavy work in the fields, and we can't get a hand."

"Is your aunt going to farm?"

"Yes. She wants to. What else could she do?"

"I don't know." He shook his head ruefully. "The question is, can she do *that?* It's a big place, with hay to cut and stock to tend. She can't do it if she doesn't get help."

"That's just the whole thing. She has to have it." She looked at him. He cocked his eyebrows at her, as though in acknowledgment of a silent question, and made a kind of grimace.

Elizabeth laughed—the blackbird's trill again, and made room for him on the seat beside her. He got his hat and climbed up on the wagon. He asked himself no questions about his interest in this child. He was interested in her, that was all he cared about. He liked her, her round firm child's face, the lovely clear eyes with the brows like slender wings above them, the loneliness of her, her difficulties—he didn't care why it was, nor whether it was a reasonable thing in a man who swaggered the world as a hard customer.

They began to talk at once. She told him about Uncle, and how they had had to build fires to thaw out the ground for his grave, and how they threw the frozen clods back in—"like lumps of iron," and she shivered in the warm spring sunshine, as she told him.

"But I held my doll so tight—the time went by."

His eyes darkened, filled with something she could not understand.

"You were left alone there, that night, with *him?*"

"Why, what else could we do? One of us had to stay."

"I suppose so," he said gently, but his eyes were

bright, and Elizabeth saw a slow red anger burn up in his face. She felt that he was offended with Aunt Jane for leaving her—even cross with Uncle for choosing such an unpropitious time to die.

"I wasn't afraid," she boasted, to mollify him. "Why, I had my doll, and I watched the wind blowing the clouds about among the stars. I'd put my hand against the window and melt a hole in the frost so that I could see those stars shining away. And I thought about you, and about a tower I saw that very day you came, when I was coming from school. It was just out of clouds, of course, but I pretended it was real, and that I could run to it, if I liked. I wasn't afraid of the prairies. They're big and still. But once, when I fixed the fire—I thought Uncle looked at me, but he didn't, of course, so that was just silly."

"Awfully silly," said Jim, and put his arm about her shoulders, and bent and brushed her forehead with a kiss. "You're a silly kind of person anyhow, young one."

"I know it. Jim, what makes the grass so blue, look, there, where that old red cow is tied—"

"It's the crocuses," he answered, like a carol. "It's the blue prairie crocuses, and in a few days the sky will be blue, and the world will be blue—blue, with a yellow sun. Don't you like it, Elizabeth?"

"Yes. Now that it's spring."

"When you get bigger and stronger, you'll like the winter too," he told her. "It's a zooming kind of thing that makes you strong and healthy. I've seen women who liked the prairie winters—they get a kind of bloom on them, like a hardy flower."

Elizabeth told him how she had noticed the grass.

"It's true," he cried, "I never thought about it, but it does seem kind of frivolous, all that green grass under the old snow."

An hour passed in confidences. At last Jim spoke of Teacher.

"She's looking for a rich husband," he said, with a wise air. "Those girls generally lose out all around. But she's all right. I like Annie Smail."

"So do I. She's been kind to me since that day you asked her to be. And after Uncle died, she used to walk home from school with me, every night, while it grew dark so early. Remember?" It seemed to her he must be familiar with every detail of that long interval. "I don't care if she does wear false hair. That's what Auntie says, but then, everybody can't have pretty hair like Auntie's. Of course, Teacher is old, but I like her."

"Old?" Jim laughed again. "Why, she's not twenty. I know, because I'm only two or three years older than she is. Just wait and see how old you feel six or seven years from now, young lady. I'm glad Annie's good to you. She's kind, but I wish I could take you and keep you and take care of you."

"I wish it too," admitted Elizabeth. "But what would Auntie do without me? Because, you know, you wouldn't take her."

"I'm afraid I wouldn't. Tell me what you learn in school."

The sun moved overhead again, with magic swiftness. At last he remembered that her aunt would soon return.

"I'll go and get you a man," he told her, putting his hat on and slipping over the edge of the seat. "I've got a man—never mind—I won't tell you the details. He's

in the store now. I'll bring him out and rope him and tie him in the wagon for you. Big Swede, who can't speak a word of English. All he knows is his own name. But you call him 'Ole' for short. We call all the Swedes 'Ole' around here. It makes it handy. He's a man of Sigurd Holton's, but he doesn't know it."

Elizabeth accepted all this as natural and leaned over the edge of the wagon to see Jim, down below.

"Young sweetness," he said, and pulled at a braid that swung over her shoulder. "If Ole doesn't mind, just tell me."

He was gone, and Elizabeth watched him into his store. He came back in no time at all with a big thick fellow, young and blond, a beard of yellow silk on his round red face. His eyes, blue, small and cunning, peered at Elizabeth.

"This is Ole," said Jim.

"Emanuel Christian, son of Christian," answered the big fellow.

"Whatever you say to him, that's the answer," Jim told her laughing.

"But we ought to call him Emanuel," said Elizabeth, doubtfully. "He ought to know his own name."

Jim shook his head with a frown.

"Don't set him up. He's a peasant. You do as I say and call him Ole."

He got a box for the man to sit on in the back of the wagon, gave him his bundle and a five-dollar gold piece. He pointed to Elizabeth.

"Boss!" he exclaimed. Emanuel Christian grinned and Jim gave him a smack on the side of his face and he stopped his big smile at once.

"Boss," said Jim sternly, pointing to Elizabeth again.

The Big Swede made Elizabeth a clumsy bow, to which she replied gravely.

"That's the way," coached Jim. "Boss him good and plenty, and make him work and he'll be happy. The only trouble you'll have with him is that he won't understand the farm machinery. But your aunt can show him about it. Teach him English as fast as you can."

Elizabeth gestured for Ole to sit down and he obeyed her humbly. Jim watched with pleasure.

"To the manner born," he said, and his eyes twinkled with mischief.

"Tell Annie I'm sending her a new feller," he chuckled. "Annie would just about suit this fellow. He'd knock her cold in the first round and let her work for him forever after."

"I think it's mean to talk about him, when he can't understand," protested Elizabeth.

Jim was pleased with her.

"All right, little one. You teach him English, and then I'll tell him a few things to his face." Jim stepped up on the hub and caught a leg over the side of the wagon box. He shook his fist threateningly in the face of the cowed immigrant, drew out from his pocket an envelope, which he showed with mysterious signs, and then pointed to Elizabeth again and made gestures, indicating work. At last he took from his coat pocket a small smooth blue Colt revolver and showed it to the Swede, then traced a line across his own throat with a fore-finger, with dreadful significance.

"There," said Jim to Elizabeth, "I've worked all the charms I know on him. He thinks I'm the President of

the United States and the chief of police and entitled to shoot him at sunrise if he doesn't work hard and do what you tell him to. Your aunt's to pay him ten dollars a month and feed him on the back porch. Don't ever let him in the house, and don't, above all, tell a soul where you got him."

"I promise," said Elizabeth, and Jim explained.

"Your aunt might feel better if she thought somebody just sent him over to the wagon, knowing you needed help. You don't need to lie about it, you little Puritan, but don't tell, because it might make trouble for me."

"I promise," she reminded him. Then she smiled and waved her hand at him as he left her, walking backward across the street, watching until the door of the store closed upon him. Even then, Elizabeth felt that his eyes were still looking through the small dark panes.

"It's like the time he made the handkerchief into a pig and made it jump around," she thought. She remembered the story Teacher had read them about Aladdin. She needed no magic lamp when she had Jim.

"He can just do anything he wants to do," was her conviction.

CHAPTER VI

AUNTIE accepted Ole as a gift from the gods and asked few questions. If she had a suspicion, she did not want to confirm it. They drove home, reaching the farm before dark. Auntie took out old covers and filled a tick with clean straw to make a bed in the bunk house, once a granary. The new man took his bundle and disappeared, to come forth without his thick blue coat and trousers, but dressed in new cotton overalls and a jumper.

Elizabeth prepared supper, while Aunt Jane introduced Ole to the cows and the milk pail. She came to the house, wringing her hands.

"He won't bring in the milk pails, Elizabeth," she said, much discouraged. Elizabeth marched out-of-doors in a businesslike way.

"Bring the pails to the house!" she ordered, and pointed to them. "Milk pails," she said, and then, showing him the little home, "House!" she repeated.

Meekly the man picked up the brimming buckets and carried them indoors. Elizabeth gave him his supper with a knife and fork and a big cup of coffee, at the little table on the back porch. If Uncle had been there, he would have eaten in the kitchen with them, but she felt it wise to follow Jim's instructions to the letter.

From this first night of his arrival, Elizabeth was often called on as a court of last resort. Ole obeyed her in most things, but he was difficult with Aunt Jane.

Elizabeth soon learned that he was not as stupid as he pretended to be. He was excellent with the livestock, sensible and gentle. He kept the stable clean. The machinery of the farm, however, the fanning-mill and the riding-plow, were Greek to him. In spite of all Aunt Jane could do to help him, and in spite of Elizabeth's shrill explanations, he would not put the wheat in the drill, but sowed it broadcast, swinging his bent arm in a jerking circle, back and forth, back and forth, as he moved over the fertile, prepared soil, his legs apart, his outline dark against the sky.

He was a picture. It so impressed itself on Elizabeth's childish imagination that she was to see him at times the rest of her life, a giant sower, with his bag on his back, his head lowered between his heavy shoulders.

Emanuel Christian did not like to work for a woman and evidently found his circumstances different from what he had expected, and little wonder. Sigurd Holton hunted through three counties for the man he had imported for himself, who had arrived safely in Waynesville and then walked out of Younger's store, never to be seen again!

Whenever Ole did not approve of the instructions, he pretended not to understand. Such base cunning was obvious to Elizabeth, who was at an age where children must devise and exercise similar defenses against their prying elders.

The man was learning a few words, and Elizabeth, in her efforts to communicate with him, had picked up a smattering of his speech, so that they spoke a polyglot of their own to each other. Her fluid imagination bridged the gap between them more swiftly than Aunt

Jane could have done, and soon he was clay in her hands. She scolded him shrilly, the ridiculous great oaf listening with confusion to the little, wind-blown figure, standing like some indignant leprechaun in the open space before the barn, the tall man and the big horses all about her.

The hand-sowed wheat grew and covered the west and north fields, a vivid green carpet, a place of sweet brightness. Ole would not use a drill, but he thought it nothing unusual to work sixteen hours a day in the fields. There was a great deal of rain, and the wheat ran to straw; and there was always water in the sloughs, that summer. They brought in the hay, a wonderful cut. The cattle were sleek on pasture. And Ole, Aunt Jane and Elizabeth never ceased from their labors.

Just as the lush grain was turning from silvery green to the more golden tones of its ripening, there came a letter from Teacher to Elizabeth. She was to live this winter with the Derecks, but they could not take her until after the harvest. Could she not stay with Elizabeth and her Aunt Jane until school opened? She had some sewing to do and her year's work to plan out. She would like to come at once, to rest and get ready for school, as she had been having such a gay summer—

Aunt Jane was reluctant, but Elizabeth begged, and Annie came.

She came in a fashionable buggy from Coal City. A tall stalwart man, with long black mustaches and bright eyes, lifted her down to the yard, as Elizabeth ran out to meet her. She was covered with dust, as was her companion, but underneath it she was more resplendent than ever. Then in the height of her beauty, a tall, big girl, with rich eyes of a warm brown, with a mouth soft and

childlike (Elizabeth's was a model of strength beside it), with an affected languishing air, she took leave of her friend in the front yard, and he drove away with a great cloud of dust following him down the road.

Annie at once came down to earth and cast off her grand manners as she took her big hat from her head.

"Well, you're looking sprightly, you young Indian," she cried. "Is that all you've got to wear?"

Elizabeth looked down on the calico sleeve-apron, and innocently pulled it up to show Annie that she had brown panties under it. She was brown of arm and limb, her blue eyes shining out of a tanned face. And she was happy to see Teacher. Teacher was interesting. With wonderful things to wear and marvelous manners, she rapidly became Elizabeth's ideal. The child could not know the power there was in the fact that Annie was young—young, and Aunt Jane, however kind and good, was old.

They went indoors. Auntie was out about the farm somewhere, and Annie Smail promptly took down her hair, piling up on Elizabeth's small bureau a half-dozen puffs that verified the rumors about her. But to Elizabeth's surprise, she saw that Annie had a great deal of hair, anyhow—it was long and silken, and curled, in little tender rings, as she braided it. She washed herself and took off a corset that must have been a yard long—it reached from her armpits to her thighs, while Elizabeth alert with childish curiosity, watched openly. Then Annie put on a clean sleeve-apron, something like Elizabeth's own, and tied a ribbon on the end of each braid, and cut a caper in the loft.

"Here's where I play little girl again. I declare,

Elizabeth, I've been to forty parties since school let out. But, my dear, do you know, my cousin that I was visiting became so jealous of me that I had to leave. I didn't care a bit, however. That was her fellow that brought me. I could have him for two cents, but I wouldn't take him!"

"Oh, he was handsome!" cried Elizabeth.

Teacher yawned.

"Him?" she said, without grammar, but with considerable disdain.

"Come on out in the yard and rest in the swing till I make some supper. Auntie said she'd do the milking. You mustn't talk about fellows around her," said the little one, wisely, and Annie agreed. They went out into the yard, and Annie sat in the wooden swing a while, then, when Elizabeth had left her, she went into the front room, brought out a rug, and lay down on the floor of the front porch to sleep. She was happy and free. Like many a woman who is willing to sacrifice comfort, income and health to style, she found a blissful reaction at times in abandonment—hair down, clothes unrestrained, a simple garment covering her flesh and serving no other purpose.

Yet, if Annie could have known it, she had never looked so lovely in her life—nor so innocent. Ole, who had been up the road looking for a lost heifer, came in through the front gate of the farmhouse and across the little flower garden, and stopped, shocked and silent, to stare at the vision before him. Indeed, he lifted his hand to his eyes and brushed them slightly, perhaps wondering if some viking goddess had come to rest here on this prairie farm. The porch was raised a little from the

ground so that it came about even with his big barrel of a chest. Annie was lying there, one hand to her cheek, like an innocent baby, flushed, her hair in tender yellow curls about her brow, her long braids lying across her throat, her tall, big body swathed in the pink apron.

Elizabeth, coming to the open screen door of the front bedroom to see if Annie were sleeping or if she wanted to come in to supper, saw Ole before she saw Annie. She saw him standing, rigid, his eyes wide and full of light. For a moment the face she had considered so gross and heavy, was almost fine, with an expression on it that might have been religious ecstasy. He was like a mortal who has stopped, transported, at the vision of some unearthly goddess. Elizabeth stifled a cry that rose to her throat, silent, warned by some quality in his expression.

Ole took a long slow step forward, steadied his body and stepped again, so that he touched the edge of the porch. His hand lifted, hovered, and after a moment, he touched, with a shy forefinger, the little foolish pink ribbon at the end of the swinging braid. It was a shy, childish touch, and Annie could not, possibly, have felt it. But his nearness, a premonition, aroused her, and she sat upright, wide awake, frightened, with a sudden loud cry, so that he was disconcerted, and fell back, away from her. She turned, her feet swinging over the edge of the porch, and stared in a white fury of indignation at the man who stood there, trying to smile, transformed again to a great oaf, in filthy overalls and jacket, a beard on his heavy cheeks, his eyes narrowed and glittering.

Elizabeth almost cried out to Annie that he hadn't looked at her so a moment before, but things moved too

quickly. Annie's long white arm flashed back, and with all the strength of her young suppleness, she struck him, struck him across the cheek, so that he reeled where he stood.

Ole steadied himself, however—he was powerful, with feet spread, and at the blow on his cheek, he laughed—a cruel sound, and reached out, and seized Annie Smail, and dragged her from the porch, and held her in his arms. She struggled against him, and Elizabeth burst open the door, and ran out on to the porch, screaming her remonstrance. But Ole never heard her. He was fighting down Annie's flashing arms, pinning them down to her sides. He did not return the blows she dealt him on his face, and head, but slowly, inevitably, he conquered her, and pinned her against him, one great arm enfolding her, his hand twisted in her braids.

Elizabeth, dancing up and down with excitement, saw Annie twist her head and sink her small white teeth into that pulling hand. Ole endured it for a moment, then, suddenly, his hand was free, and at Annie's chin. He bent her back across his arm, and pressed down his great red face with its golden beard, and kissed her—again and again, until it seemed at last she had fainted in his arms and lay slack and panting, her whole weight upon him. She was crying—Elizabeth could hear her crying.

The man's manner changed. His savagery yielded to tenderness. He stroked the golden head. He comforted her. He held her gently and pressed his lips gently now to cheek and throat, his mouth wet with her salt tears, his eyes wide, full of light, wonderful, compassionate. But Elizabeth could endure no more. She had found a short, square stick, and now, standing on the edge of the porch,

she began to belabor Ole furiously. She was crying, too, with rage and excitement, crying because Teacher was crying, crying because Ole was a beast—a beast!

He looked up at her angry efforts to punish him, stared at her in a puzzled way, reached up a hand and tweaked the stick from her and flung it far over the fence. He seemed able, by great effort only, to see Elizabeth, to realize who she was.

Annie, however, recovered herself more quickly, thrust herself out of his arms, which were slack now, and stared at him.

"Who are you?" she said unsteadily.

"Emanuel Christian," he answered, with dignity.

"He's only the hired man," cried Elizabeth. "He's only Ole, the Swede Jim Younger got for me. Wait till I tell Jim about this! He'll put you in jail till you'll never get out again."

"Hush, Elizabeth," said Annie quickly, drawing farther away from Ole, feeling back, with one hand for the pine steps that led from the yard to the porch.

"Don't scream so," she said again. "Go on in the house. I can manage this—and don't, for goodness' sake, tell your aunt. Go in, I tell you. I'll be right in."

But Elizabeth did not move. Annie looked at Ole now as though she saw him for the first time. She looked down at her fresh sleeve-apron, soiled with the violent contact with his dirty clothes. She saw a great bruise darkening on her arm. Her mouth curled back in scorn.

"I hate you!" she cried at him.

He had forgotten Elizabeth again. It evidently needed no interpretation for him to understand Annie's meaning. He glanced down at his own unpresentable, creased

and wrinkled clothes. He began to speak to her in his own tongue, softly, fluently, with a dulcet note in his voice. He gestured at himself, he shook his head in negation. He pointed to the rug where she had been lying, and then to the sky. The sun stood half-way down the western heavens, a great ball of fire, and all the land lay bathed in golden light. And when Ole had finished speaking he fell upon one knee before Annie, lifted the hem of her skirt and pressed it against his brow. And then, before she could stop him, his lips had brushed her shoes.

"Oh, Teacher," implored Elizabeth, "come away from him. Come!"

But Teacher did not move. Ole rose slowly, with the dignity that great strength can give to heaviness, and making a kind of salute, turned and strode off about the house.

Annie shuddered where she stood, and then she leaped up the stairs and ran into the house.

"Oh, the brute!" she cried to Elizabeth, who followed her. "Oh, the beast! Oh, look at my arm! Oh, I hate him! I hate him!"

"Shh—" implored Elizabeth, "Auntie will hear you."

"Oh, let me get this apron off. I'll never be able to scrub it clean. Oh, think what he did to me— Oh, oh!"

Elizabeth was helpless before such passion. Teacher did not seem at all grateful for her escape, not at all glad or relieved to be safely in the house again, but kept crying out and voicing her hatred, her indignation. Elizabeth stole to the back door and returned with the news that Ole was talking by the barn with Auntie, who would soon come in the house. Teacher controlled herself and

finally went up to Elizabeth's room to repair the damage done by the violent Emanuel Christian.

But when supper was ready, Annie could not come down. She had been crying. Her eyes were swollen, her face hard with defiance.

"Tell your aunt I'm tired and don't want supper. I'll be all right in the morning."

"I think I ought to tell her what Ole did," said Elizabeth gravely. "He ought to be sent away."

"And what would you do then?" asked Teacher. "You'd not have a man, now when the wheat is already ripening. How'd you get a binder in the fields, I'd like to know? Do you think you could get help when no one else can get it? No, don't tell your aunt. I—you see, Elizabeth, it's partly my own fault. He would never have touched me if I hadn't hit him first. She'll just find fault with me and I'd feel worse than ever to think I caused so much trouble. Just let it go. I can manage him if I see him again, which I probably won't."

Elizabeth was compelled to yield to this logic, being especially helpless before Annie's expectation of her aunt's contempt. She could well imagine what Aunt Jane would make of such an escapade with Ole. She herself felt shocked. She had received a mental picture of striking violence—the big man and woman—struggling, then suddenly, melting, flowing together—the abrupt change in this gross man, from reverence to savage passion, and back to tenderness, almost to pity. She wanted to shrink away, alone, to hide it from her eyes, but she was never able to maneuver escapes from life. It was necessary for her to return to the kitchen.

"Teacher's got a headache from riding," she said, "and she doesn't want any supper."

"She's a slug-a-bed," answered Aunt Jane with disgust, and sat down to eat the meal Elizabeth had prepared.

Aunt Jane had grown very thin that summer. But there was in her a tardy freedom, a last brief independence of the spirit. She was finding an adventure thus late in life, with this outdoor conflict with wind and weather and the hard matter of farming. There was a grim sort of satisfaction in dealing directly with Life, instead of seeing it through the dark glass of Uncle's tiresome protection and patronage.

"Ole could not find the white heifer," she said. "He's going on around the lake before it gets dark. We'll milk, if he's not home in an hour. I want to get to bed early. Do you think you could go down to the pasture and drive Star up? I want her in the paddock. It's time for her colt to come."

Elizabeth was glad to go to the pasture. She stacked the dishes to be washed by lamplight, later, when more work could not be done out-of-doors, and slipped along the path to the pasture, her small bare feet as silent on the grassy way as the feet of a wild creature.

What a summer it had been for her! Feeding the hens in the lower barnyard, skimming milk and making butter—running down, light and free in the early morning dew to give instructions to the man, preparing the meals, and eating hungrily, climbing the trees about the lake for bird nests, but never disturbing a straw when she had found one! She had watched with fascination the cattle eating their way into the big straw-stacks before they were let on pasture; she had found nests of field-mice, had made friends with the two wild half-grown cats that lived in the barn.

She had been deeply, exquisitely happy in that peace that is not aware of itself. The delicious weight of responsibility lay on her. She stood between Aunt Jane and the obdurate Ole. She watched for her aunt's weakness, her weariness; she coaxed her to eat, she brushed and braided the heavy hair at night and kept up the habit of church-going on Sunday. She planned and executed small surprises, and talked unendingly, a young bright stream falling musically over the stones of barren conversation and making a ceaseless, diverting murmur. All her life was beyond the borders of herself. Barefoot, shabby, with a future lowering over her portentous with clouds, she moved, an untroubled ray of sunshine, whose beam fell on every one near.

The mare, Star, was as far from the house as she could get, and when she saw the small figure, began to circle uneasily about the lower pasture. It was necessary she should not run away, so Elizabeth moved slowly, calling the horse. At last, by careful maneuvering, the mare was on the path, well-started toward the gate that led to the lane between the fields and on to the barnyard. The mare was slow, her body swinging with its great burden, her head hanging forward, lifting and falling as she walked.

Elizabeth loitered behind her, and once stopped altogether and turned her face to the west where the sun was now low. There was only a little whiff of cloud to catch the glow, but all the sky was roseate, clear and pale.

"Something happened—" she said half-aloud, "something happened between Teacher and Ole. She's angry now—because she didn't go on fighting him until he let

her go. Something—between them—" she paused, staring—vague tremor and alarm in her small breast. She felt the need of running, hiding, and then the great practical quality of her mind took hold of her. The far, golden sky, the open plains, the homely familiar figure of the old mare, lifted and steadied her. All the world was open, visible to sight. Her feet felt the tender warmth of the grass, the smooth soft caress of pebbles. To the north the dark figures of the grazing cattle stood out, the routine figures of the farm.

She felt a certain lively scorn of herself.

"What a baby I am—always wanting to run and hide!" she said aloud. "How I wanted to hide the night Uncle died, and wanted a tower, that day it was so cold, coming from school. I can't hide. I just have to go along. Teacher was too pretty, lying there. And Ole was gentle at first—before she slapped him. Then—he wanted to punish her. It's just between the two and I shan't rob Auntie of a good hired man because of it."

She stopped on a rise—slight, yet to her small stature, it was significant, opening the vista of the land before her. The sun came flat across the world now, in golden shafts of light—a bar of which enfolded her in giddy splendor.

"Why!" she cried, "why—why!"

She paused—her hands caught across her young breast.

"It's the light!" she exclaimed, and thrilled with wonder at the thought. "It's the same light that I saw shine from the tower top that day. It's all about me. It's just sunlight. I'm already in it—walking and moving in it, already living in my tower."

She sprang forward and ran after the old mare, which stood, drooping, at the bars. Her young blood ran quickly, singing in her veins. She stepped with the light freedom of a wild thing, stepped as though the wings of Mercury were at her heels.

"How silly it is, ever to be afraid!" she felt, and the words brought back the thought of Jim Younger, seated beside her on the wagon seat, and how she had confessed to him that she had been afraid. She'd known, even then, that it was a silly thing. And he had known it too.

The sun was low now, a sinking red ball. Elizabeth hurried to put up the bars and pushed the old mare along toward the barn paddock. And as she went the exaltation and the touch of fright both left her in a giggle that was all a little girl's.

"Jim said to tell Annie he was sending her a feller. Wouldn't she be mad if she knew?"

CHAPTER VII

The episode between Annie Smail and Ole ended in anti-climax. Elizabeth wakened in the rosy dawn to find Teacher already up and dressing. To Elizabeth's astonishment, Teacher was arraying herself in all her armor, as for some battle. She had put on over her chemise, the long, strong corset which could be drawn in so tightly at the waist to make the lovely curves! There was a kind of hook affair on the front stay of steel, and under this hook the shirt-waist band and the two petticoats belts, were fastened. She had already dressed her hair—a great mass swelling above her forehead—and fastened in curves and loops about the back of her head. She had made a curl before one ear, as though all the arrangement above were not enough. Now, the last thing, she put on her skirt of thin black wool, with a pyramidlike arrangement of spreading gores touching the floor, a vast foam of ruffled thin merino about her feet.

Elizabeth, fascinated beyond words, now jumped from bed, frisked off her little nighty and hurried into her "pants" and chemise, pulling the worn sleeve-apron over her head. She was dressed for the day—braids swinging behind her, for Auntie did her hair at night, only, and the next morning it was already combed.

Secretly she wondered why their guest was going to all this trouble, wondered why Teacher looked so pretty,

with a kind of snap in her eyes and a tilt to her head, in defiance, the child suspected, of what Aunt Jane's opinion might be. Simple and elemental herself, she knew that Annie was going forth to some encounter.

She ran down the steps ahead of the other and out into the yard where spider webs and beads of dew had made a magic carpet of the worn grass. The songs of birds filled the air and the sun, rising leisurely in the colorful east, gave promise of another long hot day—a day to harden the wheat in the head and dry out the straw.

Elizabeth was feeding her chickens. As she looked about for her aunt, she saw Ole coming up from the lake with the big geldings. She stood, mouth open, her pan falling from her hand, and stared at him.

He was not the same person, she was sure. She gave her eyes a little dig and shook herself. Then some ridiculous bubble broke in her mind and she began to laugh. Teacher wasn't the only one who was putting on war paint.

The man had evidently been in the lake overnight, for he was clean. He had shaved himself with his sharp knife, by the farm lantern hung above a polished spade. His smooth cheeks, the clean long hair thrust back from his face, revealed a surprising comeliness. He had evidently washed his clothes. They were not yet dry, but they were clean, clinging about his big body, showing dark and light in their dampness. All that summer, in spite of Auntie's protests, the man had gone barefoot. Now, he wore his store shoes, and around the neck of his cotton jacket was a tie. As he led the horses with one hand, he carried in the other a great spray of early

asters—tiny wild flowers, as blue as his own eyes that glittered with such bright anticipation.

At sight of Elizabeth, now beside herself with giggling, he frowned and grew grave. He passed her without looking. She might be the "boss," but this morning more important matters weighed on Ole's mind. He turned the horses into the stable and started for the house, Elizabeth following him.

As they drew near, Teacher came out on the back porch and stood looking away toward the schoolhouse, her head in profile, her distorted but fashionable figure thereby shown in full and startling effect. Her whole attitude, the point of her chin stuck grandly in the air, proclaimed with emphasis that this was not the simple child of Nature that had slept in a shadowed porch to be a prey to wild men, but a sophisticated lady, high in station, scornful of menials.

Emanuel Christian evidently caught the message intended for him. He paused, he faltered and came to a stop, staring with bewilderment at this grand person who could be no other, yet who could not be the same. Elizabeth, coming up behind him, laughed again, and Ole, as though thrust by a spur, moved forward and stopped before Annie.

He spoke to her humbly, petitioning her. She looked down in surprise, as though she could not recall who he was. At a cruel disadvantage but persistent, he held out the arm full of flowers.

Annie Smail put her head on one side, and on her face there appeared a look of such scornful amusement that Ole's advances were made completely ludicrous.

"Asters!" Annie screamed with a high affected

laugh. She reached down and snatched them from his arm, then flung them away so that they fell, a scattering spray, on the short dew-drenched grass of the yard.

Her hands rested lightly on her billowing hips. She looked at Ole with great disdain, shrugged her shoulders and tilted her head provocatively.

"Go away, dirty Swede," she told him.

Elizabeth had sidled to the porch as Aunt Jane appeared in the open door behind them.

Ole's face contorted with a horrible fury. He beat his fist on his chest.

"Me!" he cried, loud and dramatic. "Emanuel Christian, strong man, good, rich!"

He looked at the three women thus grouped before him; the old one with her thin sharp face; the young one, impish now, who had bossed him so unmercifully; the beautiful one, scornful, lively, hateful. A deep sex antagonism welled in him. His strong male vanity had received a mortal wound.

"Women!" he cried at them, "women, women, women! Bah!"

He turned on his heel, strode through the yard and vaulted over the gate. He disappeared into the granary that had been made into a bunk-house. In almost a moment while they stared, he came out with a bundle slung over his shoulder, rounded the barn and vanished beyond the curving shore of the lake.

"Well, now," said Aunt Jane, "you've done it. We'll never see him again."

It appeared to be true. Ole vanished from the scene that day, and nobody could learn a thing about him. Annie Smail was smitten with compunction to think what she had done.

"I never dreamed—" she tried to apologize, but Aunt Jane was too concerned about her affairs to listen. This calamity was beyond apology or explanation. She did not greatly blame Annie—knowing nothing until later of her encounter with Ole. She considered the man unbelievably stupid and timid.

They sat down to breakfast in silence. All the bombast was gone from Annie. After they had eaten, she ran up-stairs, stripped off her finery and returned to the kitchen dressed for work. She labored all day, cleaning and scrubbing the house, hunting out and washing all of Elizabeth's small garments, ironing and mending after the lamp was lit. The next morning she was the first one up and had a hot breakfast ready for the others when they came down-stairs. This left Aunt Jane and Elizabeth free for the innumerable outdoor chores.

The wheat was ripe in the fields. The neighbors already had their binders out. Aunt Jane and Elizabeth stood and looked with despair at Uncle's old binder, one of the first that had been seen in that district.

"Last year it dropped every third bundle," said Aunt Jane, "and the gavels of grain had to be picked up. We were foolish to put a crop in, Elizabeth. I could have sold my seed wheat for more than we'll ever get now. With Ole we might have managed. I could have shocked alone, or he could have stopped and gone back with me. It would have been hard, but it could have been done. Now—we're ruined—ruined."

She wrung her hands in an immortal gesture of despair, and for a moment Elizabeth was touched, swept down by imminent disaster. But only for so brief a moment it was almost unnoticed by herself.

"Something will happen," she said, and thought of Jim Younger. She found time that day to get out her school-books, find pencil and paper and write a letter:

"Dear Jim: Ole has left us and the wheat is ripe. We haven't got anybody to cut it. Your friend,
"Elizabeth Whittaker."

This note had to be delivered. Late that afternoon the child climbed on the mountainous rugged back of old Dick and rode through the dust four miles to Derecks', the nearest neighbors. Mr. Dereck agreed to deliver her note to Jim Younger when he went in to town the next day. He was a big bearded man, with shrewd small black eyes and a way that was jovial, but not kind.

"What'll your auntie think about you, writing love-letters to that rascal, Jim Younger, when she hates 'em all so?"

"It's a business letter," said Elizabeth with dignity, as she pulled the rope halter of her horse and went away. She reached home, late for supper, her absence unnoticed in the busy crises of the farm.

But Elizabeth was satisfied. That night she fixed her doll, combed and brushed its hair and set it by the open window to see the stars. She said her little ritual—she'd a friend, Jim Younger, and she never needed be alone, and afraid again.

CHAPTER VIII

They were awakened at the break of dawn, Sunday morning, by a great rattling and the stamp of horses, the shouts of men. Elizabeth, scrambling into her clothes, ran down to the yard and found half a dozen men with a team and a big farm-wagon and a clattering, glittering new binder. She opened the gate for them and they came pouring through, shouting and laughing. There were Dereck and his son, a boy not much older than herself, and other neighbors. The men had all breakfasted early, they said, and without ado they put a team in harness, laid down the fence and began to cut the wheat.

As the Widow Whittaker's circumstances were known in the neighborhood, it was not so unusual that her neighbors should come, thus, on the Sabbath day to pull the sheep from the pit.

She accepted it with tears of gratitude and gave all the credit to Uncle Whittaker. But Elizabeth, filled again with the magic potency of Jim Younger, kept a wise happy silence.

"They all thought so much of Hiram," said Aunt Jane happily. "They all thought him such a good man, a good churchman and always upright. That's why they're doing this for me. Isn't the new binder wonderful, Elizabeth? I never saw one like this before. It ties the bundles with string instead of wire or straw. It only takes a few men, one to drive and two or three to fol-

low. Well, we've got to kill some chickens and bake and get dinner ready."

All that long hot Sunday the neighbor men worked in the fields, changing the horses from time to time, using Mrs. Whittaker's own teams, resting for food, while others took up the work. The binder never ceased its clattering from dawn till dark when the last row was cut, the grain piled into shocks.

The men made ready for departure silently, drinking coffee in great gulps on the small back porch and speaking quietly to the tired beasts. Elizabeth felt a tweak at her sleeve, and looking around saw the face of Lon Dereck close to hers in the warm summer evening.

"Got a secret fer ye," he whispered, and he and Elizabeth drew away from the others into the shadow of the house.

"Jim Younger's binder," confided the boy in a low tone. "It's bran' new, never been in a field before. He brought it to my pa's last night and went aroun' and got the men to promise to come cut the wheat. He said not to tell your aunt, 'cause it'd be bitter bread for her to take a favor off him, but he came to me afore he left last night and asked me to tell you. He said he wanted you to know it was his own binder. He sells them things."

Lon stopped and dug in the pocket of his overalls. He was a big boy for his age. Elizabeth had never considered him prepossessing, but now he seemed an angel.

"Got a note fer ye," he told her.

He found it at last and put it in her hand, a square thick envelope of stiff white paper.

"I like Jim Younger," he said, and grinned at her.

"Lordee, but you should 'a' seen him last night. He was drunk as gee whizz. He gave me a real reach at his bottle. Whisky!" The boy passed the back of his hand across his mouth and made a little sucking sound of thirst. "He was so drunk I had to put him in the buggy seat myself and start him back to Waynesville. The team would take him there all right. They've been doing it a long time. He's a grand man, Jim Younger is. He giv' me a dollar."

Elizabeth drew softly, quietly away from the other and went around through the front porch into the house. She lit the cleaned filled lamp with roses on its chimney, that stood on the round table in the little parlor. She had scarcely heard Lon's repellent praise of Jim. She was lost, all else forgotten, in the quick high beating of her little heart.

It had been his binder! He had not failed her, had not forgotten. What Lon had said after the envelope lay in her hand, was lost. She slit the sealed square and drew from it a stiff white sheet. The Youngers were all men vain of their hats, the paper they wrote their letters on, the click of their spurs and the cut of their hair.

She spread it out and saw again the curves and slants of his writing, a hurried scrawl, yet with its own distinction:

"Dear Kid: I am sending you the help you need. I am glad you were a good girl and told me, though I never thought a Younger binder would cut Whittaker wheat. But that's not the way to put it. It's just your Jim, doing a favor for his little Elizabeth. I wish I could see you once in a while, young one. You're too

much alone. I hear Ole left the farm the day after Annie arrived, so maybe he didn't like her looks after all. You tell her I'll try to find somebody else for her, since she didn't like my Swede. I'm sending you a little present. Be a good child and Jim will love you always—

"James R. Younger."

Elizabeth looked in the envelope again. There was a ribbon in it, five-inches wide, made of stiff blue satin. It was a hair-ribbon a yard long! She unrolled it and found, within the folds, a small stiff cardboard, only two inches wide and a little longer. It was a photograph of Jim himself looking straight at her from under the tufted brows, his hair combed back from his forehead, the aquiline nose, the closed smiling lips, the cleft in the chin, all as real as life. He wore a tall white collar, with a wide cravat and there was a glimpse of narrow lapels before the picture faded into the edge of the cardboard. Elizabeth laid the picture against her cheek.

Then she quickly put the picture and the bright ribbon back into her envelope, blew out the lamp, ran up the steep steps to the loft and laid the envelope with its precious contents in the bottom of the little cigar-box where she kept the few remembrances of her mother.

She went to sleep by Annie's side, an exhausted small human atom, wrapped and lulled in a shining happiness.

CHAPTER IX

Aunt Jane cleaned and oiled Uncle's shotgun, unused for over three years. Elizabeth watched her with considerable curiosity. The box of shot was kept in the top cupboard drawer. Aunt Jane tried the gun, shooting out over the land in the evening dusk. It worked. The kick-back set the old woman down on the ground with considerable force, but she was satisfied.

"You see how it works, now, Elizabeth. Just tilt it over the back of the chair and point it at the door, if any one comes around the farm to-morrow. I hate to leave you alone. I'll worry about you all day. We ought to have kept a couple of good dogs instead of these silly cats; they are no earthly use. I'll put the gun here." She laid it carefully on the lamp-shelf near the kitchen door. "Be careful to keep away from the wrong end of the gun and, of course, don't hesitate to use it if you need to."

Elizabeth had no intention whatever of touching the thing, but she did not say so. She was filled with curiosity at her aunt's elaborate preparations for leaving her alone for a day. Bolts had been fixed on the front and back doors. She had been repeatedly warned against going far from the house and about watching for strangers.

"But I'm not afraid," said Elizabeth in a puzzled way. "Why should I be afraid to stay alone on the farm? I've

been here always, it seems. Nobody's ever hurt us. Don't be silly, Aunt Jane."

"Well, but you're fifteen now. You're a big girl—" the other paused, reluctant to state the fears that preyed on her.

Elizabeth laughed.

"You just told me yesterday that I was small for my age. Nobody else thinks I'm big. You go on to bed now, and get your rest. You'll have to leave here at four in the morning if you're to go to Coal City and get back again."

"I don't know—I may change my mind," said Aunt Jane dubiously, but she did go up the steep stairs and to bed, while Elizabeth washed the dishes and set the table for breakfast, laid fresh wood and kindling ready for the fire. It was true she was small for her age—a grave little person, with eyes that were long now, rather than round, and limbs that had, in some magic moment, lost the rotund simplicity of childhood. She was still barefoot, moving about the kitchen on lean strong feet. The brief skirt revealed slender, shapely limbs. Her face had become an oval, the lines slipping over smooth young cheeks from the broad brow to the soft round chin. Her braids had grown. She rolled them up and tied them firmly at the back of her head with a bit of old black string—a businesslike arrangement for every day. In all her movements there was an unusual, a delightful contrast. She had retained, beyond the usual time, the simplicity, the candor, the gentleness of her childhood. And she had gained, in the hard bitter struggle, ending now so calamitously, a maturity and strength greater than many adults ever achieve.

For neither the powerful friendship of Jim Younger nor her own persistent optimism had been able to stave off catastrophe. There had been a succession of erratic irresponsible hired men, with long intervals when the two women, the old one and the young one, were alone on the farm. Rust had come, staining and marring the beauty of the fields, spreading over the countryside like an evil dream. Aunt Jane had spent practically the last of her cash in the purchase of seed wheat from Sigurd Holton, yet now in midsummer the wheat lay black and ruined and would have to be burned off. It was the last possible disaster. It was the end. In that realization each had found some satisfaction, if only of conclusion.

The struggle had been hard on Aunt Jane. She had altered, shrunk a little, lost some of the stern rigidity of her character. She had made shifts and compromises that would have been intolerable to her old integrity. She had become a little vague, a blurred tired creature, whose heart and soul were fastened on the child she harbored and for whom she fought. But the farm had become an impossibility for her. Realizing the growing needs of the young one, she had given in with good grace to defeat. Elizabeth no longer felt the old imperative challenge to keep the farm. She would have been satisfied to stay there forever if her aunt had willed, but now the prospect of Coal City, of work there, of friends and excitements, filled her with a tremor of anticipation.

The weeks and months and years had run through her hands in a golden sand of happy useful days. But now some change, some drama loomed, and her young heart leaped to it with joy for the pain or pleasure it might hold.

She went to bed, at last, in the loft. She had no doubt at all that to-morrow Aunt Jane would sell the land to the first person she approached and come home with her pockets full of money. She knew that Aunt Jane did not share this confidence. The rust, the lull in the neighborhood were marked. No one could know that in ten years the community would be rich and flourishing beyond their wildest dreams. Just now the farm on either side of them was deserted, the road to town little used, the crops inferior, the prices down.

She wondered, deeply, why Aunt Jane so dreaded to leave her alone for the long day and the early part of the night. They could not both go, with cows to milk and hens to feed and the little calves to be cared for. But Elizabeth had never been left alone before. Somehow her aunt's fear brought back to her mind the violence she had witnessed between Annie Smail and Ole. But Elizabeth could imagine no such violence for herself. She knew with a staunch justified assurance, that it was impossible.

Elizabeth did something she had not done since winter. She undressed the doll and prepared it for bed in a nightgown of her own sewing. She tucked it in on the far side of her bed, smiling at it and kissing it, and laughing at herself.

She got out the box of her treasures and looked at them, but to-night found them suddenly futile. There was only the cardboard strip of Jim Younger's picture that she cared for. She sat and looked at it a while. She had not seen him for more than two years. Their last encounter had been on her thirteenth birthday, and it had been brief, unsatisfactory. Younger had had his

eyes on some vision Elizabeth could not share. His kindness to her had been perfunctory, the kindness of a man who has started a tiresome affair and is too chivalrous to let it lapse. But she had sensed the absence of his attention and had grown silent and remote under it, so that he scarcely knew how they had parted.

Now she looked at the picture and shook her head. It was not the picture she wanted. She looked at her summer nightgown, an affair of cotton muslin which now reached only to her knees. The cuffs had been cut off as she had outgrown the sleeve length. She felt a sudden desire to beautify herself. She wondered how she would look with her hair done up. The thought held her attention. She got up and went to her six-inch square mirror. It was no good. She could not see in it. The glass in Auntie's room was bigger—but then, with a sudden sense of shame, she put out the light and jumped resolutely into bed.

She said her prayers, then got up again and drew her cot to the window so she could lie and look out into the beauty of the heavens with the vast cool stars. She felt her cheeks burning, her heart suddenly beating fast—fast—like feet running on a road. She would go to Coal City. By some magic, whose processes do not concern youth at all but whose results are necessary, she would be rich and beautiful. She would have a dress of velvet, dark blue, with stars embroidered on it, and puffs for her hair. And she would go to a wonderful party, and there she would see Jim again, and he would stand and stare at her, and say:

"Surely this beautiful woman is not the little girl I loved——"

Morning came all too soon. Aunt Jane left in the old buckboard with the geldings in harness. She carried her old leather portfolio, in which was placed a carefully compiled list of the material assets of the farm, fences, barns, granaries and a list, with descriptions, of the stock. This was the fortune she was to exchange for a house and some occupation in town.

Elizabeth watched her far down the road and then ran back into the house to eat another slice of bread and butter and to drink another glass of milk. Then she took her milk pails and went to the barn.

She was amazed at the sense of freedom, of happiness, which filled her. There was something gorgeous in being alone in all the great space of earth and sky, alone with the cattle, alone to neglect her work, or do it. She milked and put the milk in the clean scoured pans in the cellar, fed the hens and the pigs and gave water to the calves. The horses were on pasture and had access to the lake, so the stable was empty, the geldings having gone with the rig.

With a delicious sense of being an abandoned sinner, Elizabeth stacked the breakfast dishes with the deliberate intention of leaving them. The out-of-door work was done. She followed Aunt Jane's injuctions and closed and locked the kitchen door. Then she ran up the stairs into the room which had been finished for Aunt Jane's and Uncle's bedroom. The walls had been boarded and covered with paper, long since faded. There was a proper window here that overlooked the barnyard and the lake and the land rising gently to the windbreak. There were three rude steps that lifted from the door of this room into the little loft with its slit of window, where Elizabeth slept.

Aunt Jane had a bureau that had been brought all the way from St. Paul when she and Uncle were first married. It was of shiny oak, brightly varnished, with the mirror tilted on spoollike hinges and brass handles on the doors. It was the finest thing in the house. Elizabeth, possessed with one desire, knelt before the bureau and opened the drawers. There was nothing in the top drawer to interest her. It contained only worn and faded clothes, scrupulously washed, ironed and mended and put away for another week's endurance.

The second drawer yielded the thick nightgowns, the plain, long shifts, the heavy home-made stockings. In the bottom drawer Elizabeth came on more promising material. Here was a black underskirt, part silk and part cotton, that had a sheen to it and a ruffled flare about the bottom. Here were good shoes and long black gloves and an old yellow-lace fichu. Here, too, was a box of pictures. Elizabeth, realizing happily that it was early morning, paused to look and laugh at the grand mustachios and simpering smiles of her own relations. She wondered why Aunt Jane had not worn these elegant gloves and this fine petticoat to town. She pulled the long black stockings over her slim legs and tied shoelaces about their tops for garters. She buttoned on the good shoes and sat on the floor looking at her feet. They did not look as she hoped they would,—like Annie Smail's, for although Teacher had a good-sized foot, she wore such shining, high-heeled shoes that Aunt Jane's best, buttoned loosely around Elizabeth's ankles, were disappointing. She got up, however, took off her apron and fastened the petticoat under her arms.

Magic fell over her at the touch of the long skirt

about her calves. She twisted before the mirror, looking at herself in this thrilling covering of grown-up attire.

She rummaged in the clothes-press and found a silk waist and put it on, folding back the long cuffs. The lace collar was too large for her neck, but she pinned it over, and then used the blue ribbon Jim had given her for a sash to bind the whole together.

This was something like what she wanted. The pigtails were now the problem. She unbraided the silken strands and found that she had a lovely crimp. It would not go into a pompadour, however. At last she combed half of it down over her face, snarled it behind with the brush, then, using a roll of black stocking for a "puff," pulled the hair back over this and found she had a magnificent effect in front. There were a few crippled hairpins on the dresser, and with these she wadded up her hair on the back of her head. The results were ragged behind, but stunning in the mirror. She was completely satisfied now. Recalling with a quiver of joy how Teacher had greeted Jim Younger one day in the schoolhouse, clumping in her big shoes and hampered for space, she began to prance about the room.

Finally she grew bolder, picked up her skirts and went down into the sacred "front room." Here she moved the center-table and made space for herself. From the front of the house, through the door, to the back she could walk in luxury, the sweep and cling of skirts about her limbs, the satisfying murmur of its rustle, the lofty feeling of the pompadour on its precarious perch.

"Why, how do you do, Mr. Younger?" she cried and advanced, arm thrust forward, hand lifted, and shook hands with much grace. This was elegant fun. The

flights of fancy soon grew wild. In her first craving for some romantic expression, the child let her imagination go. Mr. Younger became bold. He touched her, and she slapped him. He wanted to kiss her, but she became very indignant. When he *would* try, she struggled fiercely, she bit his hand, she fell into sobbing.

"Oh, I hate you, hate you! Look at my arm. Oh, you brute!"

She found her face wet with her own tears, her breath caught in her throat. She was ashamed. She sat down in the rocker and imagined that she would be dead when Aunt Jane came back from Coal City with the money from the sale of the farm. How badly Aunt Jane would feel. It would be dreadful. And when Jim Younger found out that she was dead, he would be sorry he had not seen her for two years. He would always mourn her.

She planned the funeral. A note, saying she wanted her doll buried in her arms, would cause considerable wonder. It was too bad Lon Dereck no longer lived in the neighborhood. He might have been a pall-bearer. But perhaps the funeral would be like that of a child who had died the year before, with a half-dozen little girls to carry the coffin. Elizabeth felt strongly that she did not want girls carrying her to her grave.

She grew weary of these unrealities. The room became hot, the grown-up clothes uncomfortable. She climbed the stairs, put the things away and donned her own skimpy garments. She danced a little in her bare feet and capered down the stairs, feeling a vast relief and freshness in her heart. What a silly she was, to cry at her own thoughts!

"Silly, silly!" she gibed at herself. She washed her face, but decided not to take her hair down for a while.

She ran out into the yard, the bolt of the kitchen door thrown carelessly on the floor. She would feed the hens, and then prepare her lunch. It was after eleven. She was starved.

In the chicken-yard she scattered the golden grain to the fowls that had all started on a dead run at sight of her, heads thrust out before them. They had cluttered about her all the way to the granary. She looked in the troughs; there was plenty of water. She peeked over the fence at the pigs; they squealed loudly at her, and she laughed and mocked them. Turning, she started past the big barn to the house.

She stood rooted, her heart beating with a sharp quickening. Then all her body grew light and strong and ready for flight. A man, thick and burly, with a pack upon his shoulder, was coming around the lake up the cow-path, toward the house.

CHAPTER X

She put the bolt in place over the door, took down the big gun and braced it over the chair-back, as Auntie had showed her, so that she could swing and point it. She wondered how she had got into the house so quickly and quietly. She did not feel the remotest consciousness of fear but was held in the suspension of all feeling,—that alacrity of heart and brain, that perfect functioning that had taken possession of her at sight of the figure on the path. Her hair, still in its great pompadour, but twisted and sliding now, felt heavy on her head, but she did not touch it. She knelt by the window in the kitchen, so that just one eye took in the barnyard and the stranger.

He looked around him, then up at the trees. He went into the barn, and Elizabeth waited. How big he was! What great thick shoulders! There was something familiar in the swing of his body as he came out. He wore a derby hat and a dark suit. The coat was thrown over his arm, a bundle over his shoulders. His white shirt was pulled tight across the chest, and a loose tie was around his throat. She had no idea who he was. No neighbor, not any one she knew.

He went into the granary. The squawking hens flew as he passed them. Elizabeth watched the granary door as a cat watches a mouse-hole. The man emerged and looked toward the house.

She was convinced, by no reason or logic, but by instinct, that he had not seen her silent easy flitting across the open space of the door yard. She had a feeling of invisibility, such as wild things must possess at times.

He was coming directly toward the house, and Elizabeth drew away from the window, close to the door. She waited, crouching, silent, thrilled and wary, but not afraid. The man began to hammer on the door, and once he called. There was a lull, then steps on the front porch, then knocking at the door. Elizabeth was motionless. It seemed to her the clock ticked so loudly surely he could hear it. He left the porch after a little, but wherever he went the grass kept his movements secret.

Aunt Jane's apprehensions had been justified. But the young girl who had wept such large tears that morning over an imaginary encounter was now fearless, competent, obeying her aunt's injunctions and also her own true instincts in her alert silence in the locked house.

But she felt her invulnerability in the swift blood that flowed through her veins, in the youth that can anticipate no disaster, except the coveted ones of romance. Her thoughts, clarified in excitement, swept back to the day she had brought the mare up from the pasture, when fear had vanished forever in a strong sense of personal security. Now she felt strong walls all about her, towers over her head.

An intense magnetism, stronger than she could withstand, caused her to turn her head and stare. She had forgotten the little window cut in the washroom. There was a face there, staring, pressing against the glass—a big face, round and red, with golden down over the fat cheeks and little, gleaming blue eyes.

The poise of the head, the hunch of the shoulders, were as familiar to her as the name that sprang to her lips in a glad shout.

"Ole! Ole!"

She threw down the gun, jerked the bolt from the door, ran outside across the porch and leaped toward the man, who turned, showing all his fine white teeth in his great oafish grin.

"Little 'Lizabet'," he said to her, and the very sound of his voice, the old, thick soft tone, ran through her like a glad current of joy and assurance.

"Oh, Ole!" She flung herself at him, caught at his sleeve and gave his arm a thump, while her feet capered with joy.

"I'm so glad to see you. I'm so happy it was you. I was just going to fix lunch. Come on and I'll give you something to eat. Where have you been all these years?"

She stopped abruptly. She drew back and regarded him with such severity that a little of his old timidity came back on him.

"You ran away just when the wheat was ready to cut. You're a dirty bad Swede, and I don't like you a bit. I'm going to have Jim Younger arrest you. Whereever did you go? Oh, Ole, I'm so glad it was you, and not somebody I didn't know. But I wasn't afraid, was I?"

Her quick moods were too much for him. He made the gestures of a man knocking away buzzing insects. He set his bundle, his folded coat and his derby hat, down on the back porch and implored her to silence.

"I can speak Inglis' now," he informed her. "I tell you all about. Ole angry. Ole's heart hurt—here!" He placed his hand upon his heart with the simplicity of a

child, to show her where his pain was. He opened his shirt, and Elizabeth caught a glimpse of a barrel of a chest, covered with golden down. He drew forth a canvas belt and threw it on the porch floor where it gave out a muffled chinking. He pulled his shirt together, took up the belt and showed it to her. There were little pockets sewed with strong coarse thread. From these he took gold coins and piled them on the floor of the porch, the sunlight gleaming upon them. He was supremely satisfied when the belt was empty, the money all displayed.

"Why, Ole!" cried his old boss, "you're rich! Where did you get all this money?"

"Everywhere," he answered with pride. "I had four-hundred dollars on my belt when I come here to work. I left here. I work in mine, in lumber camp, in mill. I save money, live cheap, lend my money out, get more again. Now, Ole very rich and want to own land."

He paused, looked all around, his eyes full of stern reproach.

" 'Lizabet', I come here last summer, other time, too, at night, and look all around, in granary, on porch, see how farm works. See all the time women can't farm—no good. But you should ought to have dog here, to bite man—comes snooping around. For shame—not to have dog to bite Ole."

"Don't scold me," she answered indignantly. "I wanted a dog, but Aunt Jane said Uncle would never get another dog after his old pet died, so she wouldn't either. I wanted a dog I could teach to go after the cattle, but she wouldn't let me have it. Why did you come back?"

He sat down on the porch and leaned against the

wall of the house. Elizabeth could see that he was hot and dusty, so she went to the pump and brought him a cold drink. Ole looked at her and sighed profoundly.

"Elizabeth, where is—young woman? Where is she?"

"You mean Teacher—Annie Smail?"

"One day sleep on porch, look so good, like baby. Next day, stand in yard—grand old woman, hate Ole. Where is she?"

"I don't know, Ole. She's gone away. I guess she's married now. But you shouldn't have acted so to her. That wasn't nice."

He looked at her and shook his head.

"Nice?" he said, as though he did not understand. Suddenly they both became aware of Elizabeth's pompadour slipping sidewise on her young head. The part had asserted itself, and now the black roll of stocking showed through the smooth brown hair. Ole reached forward and with a deft twist pulled this out.

"You be big girl now, catch feller?" he asked.

Elizabeth laughed, remembering her pompadour. What hours and hours away!

"You rest," she said. "You're tired from walking. Go to the pump and wash yourself. I'll go braid my hair and get some dinner for both of us."

They ate on the back porch as Ole steadfastly refused to come into the house.

"Your aunt old crank. Won't like me in house. I eat here," he argued, reasonably. So Elizabeth brought her plate and cup out to the porch and sat on the steps with him.

They had a great deal to tell each other. The gold was all wrapped up now and put away, but every little while

Ole ran his thumb about his belt, feeling his beloved treasure. It was grand to be rich! Elizabeth could not get over her astonishment that he had all that money when he worked for them and she had berated him so furiously in the barnyard with all the big horses about.

Elizabeth told him about the harvesting of the crop he had deserted and all the years in between. They laughed together over the day Jim had put him in her wagon, and now she learned for the first time that he had been bound for Sigurd Holton.

"That Jim—he bad scamp. He cut my neck off—ha—ha!" laughed Ole, and swayed back and forth, his huge mouth open. Elizabeth, giggling and rocking beside him, liked him tremendously.

"So now we are going to sell the farm and go to Coal City to live. We're poor now, Ole, and you are rich," she added soberly.

Ole became silent, his eyes shifting rapidly as he tried to look all over the farm at once.

"I come for buy farm," he told her. "I been many farms—always like this one the best. I t'ink to myself, women will fail. I hear you got rust here. I know you can not put in corn and turnips and potatoes. So I wait to see no one else buy, so I come back. But I won't pay much—only, I pay gold. Your aunt can not sell the farm else she sells it to me."

Elizabeth was delighted at the prospect of gold. They began to bargain. There were the horses and the pigs—

"No good," he said with decision. "I get good stock—mares from the best sales—bring me colts worth a hundret dollar, maybe."

"A colt!" she cried in derision.

"Jass—a new one—just born," he answered. He tried with his limited vocabulary (but what an improvement on the old one!) to tell her how his ancestors farmed—the best sheep, the best pigs, the finest horses. So Ole would farm! He had no use for Aunt Jane's mixed horses. Gray, black and brown. He would have only mares on his farm—all one size and height.

The argument grew fierce, and Elizabeth whacked her cup smartly on the porch floor to think he set himself up so. She put him in his place with considerable asperity. He became silent, stubborn, his face a mask. He looked at her, and then laughed again, the great booming noise, and reached to touch her long swinging braid. She had been in too much haste to roll it up.

"Little 'Lizabet', Ole t'ink many times about you. Such a smiling little girl—so little, so young, so much to work and boss poor Emanuel. That Jim—he bad rascal. All the mans talk of him from Waynesville to the lumber-camps. He drink and fight. Ole t'inks sometimes his little 'Lizabet' need some man around, look after her and shoot such a feller, he come grinning around. I tell you—" he rose and squared himself to fight in an angry imaginary scene. "I kill man come around here and look at you. Your aunt old fool. This farm no good. Nothing good, nowhere, except little girl bump Ole on the head with piece of wood."

He shouted with laughter at this recollection, and Elizabeth laughed, too. Yes, she had hit him on the head, all right. The afternoon passed in a dream of friendly talking. Ole milked the cows and brought the steaming pails to the house. He made up a bunk for himself in the granary.

"You lock and bolt doors. Somebody come in. Maybe Ole come in house—night gets dark. You hear? Lock tight—all inside."

"I'm not afraid, Ole."

"You better be 'fraid. Somebody might hurt you."

"Nobody'll hurt me, Ole. You wouldn't, anyhow."

"You lock the doors, you hear me? Stubborn dummy!" he cried at her in exasperation. He emptied the coffee cup, and got up and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

"Your aunt come home. You tell her Ole sleep in granary and Ole buy farm to-morrow. You be good girl, you go to Coal City. I know Coal City. Many mans go there—drink and spend money. Not Ole. Ole save his money, buy nice farm, be rich man like Sigurd Holton—get good wife and live a long time maybe, yes?"

"I'm sure of it," said the friendly Elizabeth. "Oh, Ole, I'm so glad you came. It was fun to be alone, but then I got tired of it."

She went indoors and dutifully locked and bolted the house against intruders. It was almost morning before her aunt returned, gray with exhaustion, worn with anxiety. Elizabeth, hearing the team in the yard, went down and helped the stiff, worn old lady from the buggy.

"I ought to have stayed over. The horses are almost dead. But I had to come back," she said.

"Why, Auntie, I'm all right. I'm really quite safe. Ole is here. He's sleeping in the granary. He'll put the horses away for you."

"Ole!" cried the aunt, her face alert with horror. "That gross Swede—the man that attacked Annie Smail, here all day alone with you?"

"Yes," said Elizabeth, construing the horror as amazement. "He has a belt full of gold. He wants to buy the farm. He's rich, Auntie, and if you'd just waited another day, you wouldn't have had to go to Coal City. I was glad Ole came, it made me feel so safe to have him here!"

CHAPTER XI

They settled the matter after three days' haggling. Ole, Elizabeth saw, was not to play the rôle of fairy godfather. He argued over every price, and she scolded him with some of her old shrillness, feeling that he beat her aunt down unmercifully. Yet, on the other hand, she sensed that Aunt Jane had the prejudice of her race and nature to make what was hers or had been Uncle's, exaggerated in value. She knew that Ole was right—the land would have to be plowed deep and other crops put in. There was much work to do—he would have to buy new implements. The lake was all right, but he was buying land, not water!

At last, however, the thing was concluded, and they all went to Waynesville together in the farm wagon. The deed was transferred, the money paid out and deposited in the bank. Arrangements were made to secure an auctioneer from Coal City. There would be a "public sale of goods and chattels."

They now went back to the farm, to pack for leaving. It was not much of a business, that packing. The sale took place in Waynesville. Men came and drove the horses and cattle off to town, leaving only the geldings and the big farm wagon with which Aunt Jane and Elizabeth were to move. They packed their things in that, with Ole's help. He carried and worked for them without

thought of pay. They stripped the rooms, but the wagon was not burdened. They planned to leave in the morning and drive until ten, to rest the horses and have lunch, then start on again about noon and get to Coal City by midafternoon. That last evening, Ole called Elizabeth to the kitchen door.

"You like it here, little one?" he asked her softly.

Elizabeth looked out across the fields, dun and golden, in the sunlight, at the maples that would soon be scarlet, and the yellow oaks by the lake, dancing against the dark blue haze on the northern ridges.

"Like it!" It was bone of her bone. She felt a sudden insufferable sense of defeat at leaving it. It was her childhood, her hold on life, her dream. She saw it under snow with horses in the yard and a slim young figure in mackinaw and scarlet kerchief, lifting her into the cutter. If she left the farm, would she ever see him again? She looked back sorrowfully and found Ole's blue eyes blazing on her.

"You smart girl," he told her. "You always scold, scold. Make good wife, always scolding, always want t'ings right. You like stay here and marry Ole? Make lots of money. I let old woman stay, too."

Elizabeth was stunned. No one had even looked at her yet, except as old Miz' Whittaker's adopted niece. "The little one,"—they called her.

For one wild and foolish moment Elizabeth, knowing that she was only playing, considered this idea. To marry Ole! To be married—at fifteen. To stay on the farm and live forever. To keep Auntie here and some day be rich, like the fabulous Mrs. Holton, whose husband had been an ignorant immigrant——

But she knew, before the dream had time to parade all its bright wares, that it could not be. She looked at Ole—at his broad face, the stubble on it, the gleaming eyes, not so stupid, perhaps, but without the mockery and laughter she had learned to want. And she knew with abrupt certainty, that such a thought would revolt Aunt Jane more than any poverty or loss. Beyond big, blond, gross Ole, there loomed another figure, imperative, compelling, a figure at once young, light and romantic, quick and teasing, full of laughter and understanding.

"No, Ole," she said steadily, "I don't want a man I'll have to be scolding."

He took it with no visible sign of disappointment.

"You come back and marry me, some day, you like to," he offered. "Ole always do anything for little 'Lizabet',—first boss I got in this country. Little 'Lizabet', be my friend?"

She shook his great horny palm with pleasure and felt the sense of loss and homesickness somewhat mitigated.

At dawn they were on the road to Coal City, leaving behind them the farm to which Aunt Jane was not even to return as a visitor. The road led out among the level fields, far across the morning world. Ole stood behind them, a brooding, watchful figure. The horses nodded their pointed ears above the dark flow of mane, lifting and falling, lifting and falling, with monotonous regularity. But far on the western sky, the child Elizabeth could see rising the pearly spires and rosy walls of the city of adventure. Dawn pursued them. They had only a handful of possessions. But the World, Life and Romance lay over the rim of the sky-line, and before night, they would reach it.

CHAPTER XII

She was fifteen years old, but nobody would believe her.

"You're just a child," said the Scotchman who ran the eating-house beside the railroad station. "I doubt you're even thirteen, but there's a kind of firm look about you. I couldn't give you hire, though, for you couldn't carry one of our great trays, and I'd be ashamed for to let you be scrubbing or washing dishes."

"I'm strong," said Elizabeth, and then she added with acumen, "and I'm good at arithmetic, and I'm honest."

Stuart laughed in a high cackle. Elizabeth stood bravely alone near the door. It was midmorning when the work was slack. Outside the snow was piled along the window ledges. The cars of coal in the yard beyond were capped with white, and the steel tracks gleamed with bitter ice.

"I doubt not you're honest," said the tall thin man with the kindly brown eyes. "What could you do? It's not seemly, a child workin'. Takes *work* to earn a living. You'd better be minding babies."

"There's no money in that," argued Elizabeth so soberly that Stuart cackled again.

"You see," she explained, fighting tears in a desperate resolve not to cry, "I've got somebody to take care of. My aunt, Mrs. Whittaker, has had to quit farming, and we've sold the land and bought a house on North Street

up the hill, so we'd have a place to live. But we don't dare spend our last cent. There's taxes and sickness, maybe, and my aunt's old. She suffers from the rheumatism. *She* can't work. She's too shy, anyhow, and afraid of strangers after living on the farm so many years. You can't expect people like us to go to the poor farm. I'll soon be sixteen. I can't help it that I'm small. My mother was a little woman, and I'll never be big. But I can't sit home for that."

"No," he said with sympathy, "you can't. So you're Hiram Whittaker's niece, are you? The little one I've heard about, working on the farm and tending cattle. You're a brave girl, and I shall have to help you. Not for Hi Whittaker's sake, but for your own. You speak up right and proper when you say the poor farm's no place for you. Could you sit up there at the desk and make change from customers and not let them rob you? Could you keep a ledger for me and make out a statement every month, so I can see where I'm standing and keep track of what I pay my help?"

"Of course I could," Elizabeth said proudly. "Why, I've done lots harder things than that. Let me try, anyhow. How much will you pay me?"

"Fifty cents a day and your meals," he told her. She took off her knitted tam-o'-shanter and the old cape and climbed up on the stool behind the drawer with its wooden cups full of silver change.

"You'd better do up your hair," he told her. "Those pigtails of yours make you look like a little girl in school. Have your aunt make your dresses longer and get some shoes with heels on them. Get a comb for your hair. I admire a comb in a woman's hair."

He came around behind the desk and showed Elizabeth how to make change. He taught her to ring a coin on the desk to catch the sound of it. He brought from a shelf in the kitchen a journal stuffed with unrecorded bills, dusty with flour and odorous with spices, and a pen and ink for Elizabeth to occupy her time with. She wanted a pencil, and he got one from the cook, a wicked, bitten stub.

"I'll get you a new ledger and nice sharp pencils and some good pens to-day, so you can manage. Take your pencil and this pad, and write out the amounts for change—twenty cents from a dollar bill—and you won't make mistakes."

It was getting toward noon, and the cook bellowed for him. The counter boy wiped clean the long tables, and Elizabeth ran her fingers over the pieces of money in the drawer. She took her pencil and pad and began to figure.

Fifty cents a day was three dollars a week. There would be no work on Sunday. And her meals! Aunt Jane could feed herself on very little. There'd be enough money to buy kerosene, and one could get the poor coal from the mine scraps for little more than hauling. Why, it was plenty of money—pressed down and running over! In the spring they would have a garden. Elizabeth, fortunately, didn't grow very fast, and her clothes lasted well. And now she would wear a real puff in her hair, not just a roll of black stocking.

It was always warm in the restaurant, and except for the walk back and forth night and morning, Elizabeth was indoors. She began to grow a little plump again. She really enjoyed the work and made fast friends in no

time at all with Jo the counter boy, Marc the cook and with Mr. Stuart.

There flowed in her the bright blood of independence. She was working, sustaining herself and another. The deep spiritual satisfaction of this sturdy ability lent her a new poise, instilled real dignity in her clear gaze. To be self-supporting was a divine quality, a reflection, a sign of power.

Mr. Stuart fixed a bell which she could ring in case of a recalcitrant customer. This bell, jangling in the kitchen, instantly brought Stuart himself, or one of the counter boys or the cook, if no one else was about. But for the most part, she had little trouble. Her small grave face with its sweet blue eyes, her friendly smile, her soft voice, were her defense and her claim to courtesy from the hardest old wreck who came in for food and coffee, still staggering from other stimulants.

Soon all the brakemen and the conductors who came in at regular hours for meals knew her by name, and Elizabeth began to count them as a large group of friends and to feel her little job a place of importance in the world of the young bumptious city.

They had bought a little white house easily heated from the kitchen range. It was snug and warm, and Aunt Jane kept it as tidy as her kitchen had been in the years before she worked in the fields. It was a matter of economy now to rent the front room, and the two shared the back bedroom, sleeping together in the big old box of a bed—the old woman always cold, the child sleeping in a warm ball of youth and health.

The roomer in the front bedroom changed frequently. It was usually a man from the mines or warehouses,

some one who could afford a clean snug little room such as Aunt Jane offered. This revenue placed them a little beyond the doors of penury into a place where their accustomed thrift could provide for them in decent comfort.

Sometimes Elizabeth met the men from the mines. They had worked all day in water in the pits, and had walked from the mines to their huts on South Hill in trousers and boots frozen stiff in the sharp winds, their legs incased in sheaths of ice. For in the nineties there were no steam rooms for men from the pits.

Aunt Jane always had a cup of tea ready when Elizabeth came in at seven o'clock. Each one had eaten her supper, of course, but the cup of tea shared by the kitchen lamplight was a bit of sociability that neither could forego, and Elizabeth, pulling out the hairpins and letting down her hair, for Aunt Jane to brush and braid for the night, would recount the day's adventures.

"Whom do you think came in the restaurant to-day, Aunt Jane?" she would demand. "Lon Dereck! He's braking on the road. He's nearly six feet tall, and he was smoking a cigar. I hardly knew him."

Or, on another occasion:

"Ole was in again. That's the third time he's been to town this month. I thought he would surely stay all day. He would pay his bill and stand and talk to me, then go back and eat again. He said he worried about me, and when I told him neither of us worked as hard as we did on the farm, he wouldn't believe me. It seems queer that he drives all the way to Coal City for supplies, when Waynesville is so much nearer the farm. But he says he has a good team of young Clydesdales he

likes to exercise. He only feeds his cattle once a day, so he can come away like that, and he lets the calves in with the cows. He doesn't try to churn or do any of that work."

Or, another night:

"To-day the newly married couple from the hotel came in again, Auntie. They're going farming when spring comes, and such dudes! Every one is laughing at them. Mr. Stuart says Hal Younger sold them a quarter-section that is half-brush and the rest slough. The man paid cash for land he hasn't even seen yet."

"The Youngers are making a fortune selling land to dudes," said Aunt Jane severely. "Don't speak to them if they come into the restaurant. I reckon they come to Coal City at times."

Silence fell between them, as it always did when Aunt Jane voiced her persistent resentment against the family who played such an important part in the political and financial life of the community.

"Aunt Jane," Elizabeth asked softly, "why do you hate them so?"

"Because Uncle did."

"But they never harmed you—did they? Maybe, Aunt Jane, Uncle was mistaken. I feel as if I'd like to have Jim Younger for my friend, and the way you look at things I couldn't. Why do you feel so bitter? I can't understand it."

For a moment the veil that had grown in the old woman's mind was torn, and she saw, with inner eyes bright with every detail, the old bitter quarrel against the Youngers. She had overlaid it with so many reasons, so many excuses, it had become so blurred and dimmed

with years of intolerance, that she could scarcely name it now, but she felt some menace toward her child and made an effort to speak.

"When I was a young wife—I must have been thirty, Hal Younger fell in love with me," she said slowly, with difficulty. "He was younger than I—a boy like Jim is now, and he looked like him."

She paused as if groping back in the dark sources of hatred and humiliation. But her mind recoiled from this old wound almost before she touched it.

For Hal Younger's hot young passion had not been unrequited. She had loved him desperately, with a dark sense of shame and sinfulness. But she had not been able to hold him, so young, so volatile, so impressionable was he. Before the emotion he aroused had come to any definite and satisfying climax, he had left her. It had been the one dark and wayward impulse of a life of great personal rectitude. And her love, turned back upon itself, had been changed to bitter, unrelenting hatred, in the chemistry of her pride. For he stood to her as the symbol of her own temptation, of all the weaknesses and sorrow of the human race. And Jim, even more vital and attractive than his brother had been in his youth, filled her with fear for Elizabeth.

There was a strong implacability in her voice when she spoke again:

"I know," she said with clear perception, "that you are young and innocent enough to make a hero of Jim Younger. I would sooner see you go through life withered and alone than to see you belong to him. He is not fit to touch the hem of your skirt. None of the Youngers bring anything but sorrow to the women who love them.

Promise me you will never have anything to do with Jim."

Elizabeth was silent. At last, with a surprising quality of character, she gave an answer:

"I can't make such a promise. Jim's been good to me. Some day, maybe, he'll want me for a friend. I'm sorry, Aunt Jane. I'd do most anything for you. But I don't want to make any promises about my life—I want to wait and see what's going to come. I—I can promise you to be all you'd wish. You mustn't worry about me. It's not likely Jim will ever look at me again or remember me."

"No, it's not likely," said the aunt with some bitterness. "Not considering what I hear about him from the neighbors. He's been making a fool of himself, running after a woman that he's no business to look at. No, Elizabeth, I guess it's not likely Jim Younger will ever care about you. You're too little and quiet and far, far too good."

CHAPTER XIII

This conversation altered the course of Elizabeth's vague dreams. She was reading now, carrying back and forth, what books she could find and borrow; reading sometimes in the afternoon glow at her high desk before the early supper rush came in, reading at home in the long winter evenings. The books varied from *The Duchess* to *Treasure Island*. Good, bad and indifferent, false and true to life, stories of passion and stories of adventure, all were welcomed by her thirsty, lively young mind. She read things entirely unsuitable and was untouched by them; she devoured whole novels whose standards were false and petty, and her mind discarded them undigested, her mental life unchanged. But it made more real the rosy spires and marble halls of adventure in the humdrum life spent between the horseshoe counter of the railroad restaurant and the little house high on North Hill.

All Elizabeth's private and personal dreams centered about the bright figure of Jim Younger, whose ringing laugh clung in her mind as the symbol of youth and happiness. But she no longer dreamed of him as a little girl dreams, as some remote and impossible hero. She longed now to meet him on the street in the winter dusk. She planned his coming into the restaurant, the renewal of the old friendship which had died under the hard censorship of Aunt Jane's hostility.

Not died,—no, she would not admit this, for she knew that the young man who had held her with his arm on the high seat of the wagon and agreed with her that she was a silly thing, would never be a stranger to her. So closely did she hold him in her heart, her very persistent clinging must invoke remembrance in him, in return.

So she anticipated some propitious meeting, a revival of old happiness, the warm arms, the kind heart, the loving sympathy. And one day, when she was least expecting it, a meeting came to pass.

It was almost time for her to leave the restaurant. A farmer and his wife sat at a table under the windows, and a few men were still perched on stools at the counter. The weather was bitterly cold, but the farmers had begun to come into town, making ready for the break-up of winter.

Elizabeth was adding up the money in the till, putting the silver coins in bright piles, marking them off on a pad and gathering them up into a puckered leather bag that belonged to Mr. Stuart. The place was quiet, Elizabeth absorbed in her task.

The outer door opened, letting in a draught of snow-laden wind. Elizabeth could glimpse the railroad station and the piles of baggage, whitening under new snow. A woman had come in, her escort closing the door against the night. Elizabeth, her hand on the money-bag, stared so at the beautiful lady that she did not, at first, recognize her companion.

Nobody as lovely as this had ever entered the humble place before. Indeed, Elizabeth had never seen any one so grand, so sparkling. She was tall and very fair, her silken curls wet with snow. Her small hat with its dark

nodding plumes did not look at all like Teacher's,—ah no!—but fit her with a grace and beauty that made it seem a part of her. She wore a long cape of purple velvet that hung in folds about her. With a laugh, she stripped it off in the sudden heat of the room and stood revealed in all her beauty. She wore a plaid-silk shirt-waist pulled down to a V in front and held in place by a girdle of black silk; her skirt was dark, full and swirling about her feet, its ruffles wet with snow. From beneath the skirt a small pointed toe peered forth. "Spikes" on small black ribbons dangled from her belt. Pinned high on her bosom was a gold watch with a heavy gold chain and a sliding clasp. Her little hands were incased in fine, fawn-colored kid gloves, and she moved them with a lively grace.

Elizabeth absorbed every detail, as the woman came brightly, quickly forward. Her rubbed pink cheeks, her brilliant smile, her small white teeth (the better to eat you with, my dear,) and her marvelous grace and elegance as she turned to speak to the man behind her, so hypnotized Elizabeth that she could not look away. Then her eyes glanced back, and met other eyes,—and stopped, while through her body darted a numbing thrill.

Jim Younger did not see her, however. He was hardly conscious of meeting her eyes, but turned and tossed his hat on a stool by the door and hung his fur coat on a peg. He followed his companion eagerly, his face lit with a smile of pride and satisfaction.

He was not so tall as she had remembered him, but except for the deepening increase of his charm he was unchanged. His black hair fell forward abruptly on his brow. His face was reddened with wind and weather,

his nose firm, and his blue eyes marvelous under the thick brows. He moved with his old swaggering grace, his body swinging a little from the hips, his shoulders (squarer, heavier than she had known) twisting slightly as he walked with an exuberance of healthy vanity. There was a masculinity, a power emanating from him that was almost too much for her. Her girlish dreams had been pale insipid things, contrasted with this virile careless manhood. She stared enchanted as he sat down opposite the beautiful lady who had already taken a place at a small table, her gorgeous wrap thrown carelessly over a chair beside her.

They leaned toward each other, as birches sway in a wind. His bronzed eagle face was thrust smilingly toward her. She reached out and tapped Jim playfully on the arm and held out her hand, palm upward. He unbuttoned and stripped off the thin glove and put it in his pocket, saying something lost in the confusion that roared in Elizabeth's ears.

"Do you want my money, or don't you?" asked a harsh voice.

With incredible effort (oh, why must she always have to go ahead in confusion and pain, without escape, without privacy?) Elizabeth took the tag from the person before her and gave him change. Once before she had stood, her face pressed to a window, in order not to look with fear on the body of Uncle Hiram, so terrible on the floor. So now she did not turn again to stare at the couple so near her, but keeping her face rigidly forward, managed, fumblingly, to count her money out.

"I'm sorry I made you wait. Run along, child. It's snowing and it'll be a long walk for you," said Mr.

Stuart behind her, and Elizabeth, praying for invisibility, crept down from the stool.

"What's the matter, young 'un?" he demanded. "Are you sick? Go sit in the kitchen a bit before you start out in all this storm."

Elizabeth found that she could not speak. Her lips would not open. Her voice had died in her throat. She managed a smile of sorts, which frightened Stuart more than her silence, and then she slipped down behind the counter into the kitchen, where she got herself a cup of coffee and put on the old shabby cape and her overshoes. She pulled the home-knitted tam of ugly wool down over her hair and went out into the silent whirling snow.

CHAPTER XIV

THE next day was Sunday. Elizabeth arose, possessed of a desperate, a terrible necessity to get away from this pain, the first she had ever known.

What was it that burned with such unrelenting fire in her breast? With icy hands, flushed face and consuming heartache, how could she speak gently and go about as usual?

She could do it only by being very busy. It was her sixteenth birthday, a mocking circumstance she thought, finding the ability to grin a little at herself, unconscious of the tragedy of irony in a child's mind.

She washed her hair and mended her clothes. She went alone to the afternoon church services and walked afterward all the way to the river where she leaned on the bridge railing, pressing her hurting heart against its cold sharp edge. The day was brilliant with sunshine, but cold. It was, she thought, like the sunshine of the dreams she had dreamed, a bright glare which left life bitter and unwarmed.

What a baby she had been to suppose he would be alone in the world, waiting for her. Last summer she had dressed herself in Aunt Jane's old clothes and had paraded her fine manners, imagining some encounter. He could have found her any day he had remembered her. Circumstances, chance, were not essentials of their meet-

ing, as she had planned it. And now when Fate threw him at her, he had not even recognized her. How could he see her when the sun was in his eyes? She was lost in the vividness of a life in which she had no part. She was only a forlorn child to whom he had once been kind, had once admired for her courage.

Tears burned within her, but she would not shed them.

"If I cry," she told herself fiercely, "it's just admitting that things are wrong—that things can be wrong. It's got to be right—my tower stands all about me. I won't admit anything else. I'll not cry—I'll not say that everything is lost—that he loves some one else and will never be my friend again. I won't give way to it. I won't!"

And she didn't. She rushed home, took off her shabby wraps and went to look at her scarlet face in the mirror. How could she have expected him to know her with her hair in this ridiculous pompadour and a comb sticking out in such a crazy fashion? How could he know her in the tight collar of a shirt-waist—he who had sat on the wagon seat and pulled her braid and remembered her as a little girl—and there she sat in a railroad restaurant! What man would look for his love, his darling, in such a place—hidden by a high counter, coins piled before her and a dirty money bag in her hand?

Elizabeth turned from her mirror, picked up the bright red doll and sat down on the little stool. But for the first time, Jim's gift failed to comfort and delight her. It was a silly thing with a body of leather and rolling eyes that opened and closed.

"No! No!" she whispered aloud, pressing the doll

to her heart with a pang of remorse at her own disappointment.

"There is love for me. Somewhere, somehow, I'll find it. Happiness and strength and peace—I'll find all I've been hoping for. Every bit. Every bit. Not a thing will be gone. It may be he—but if it isn't, life will be perfect anyhow."

Yet in spite of her courage, there now seemed to be no purpose or arrangement to her life. Aunt Jane, seeking her, found her alone in the window at dusk.

"You're not well—moping," she said anxiously. "I think your work is too hard for you. You're so young."

"I'm sixteen. I like the work. It's better than staying home. It's just—well, my head aches."

"Let me brush your hair. I know that will make you feel better." Aunt Jane brought the wooden-backed brush, took down the mass of soft hair and brushed and braided it.

"I love a braid," said Elizabeth, looking at the silken brown thing hanging over her shoulder. "Why can't I wear them?"

"You could," said Aunt Jane. "I saw a picture once—" She finished the other braid and began to wind the two softly about the girl's small head—one braid this way, the other that—put the hairpins in place and pulled the hair forward, so that just the parting showed over the pure white brow.

"Now, if your collar were low so that your chin didn't look so pointed, you'd be pretty enough. You'll get a beau one of these days. Girls marry young in the West."

Elizabeth looked into the mirror with curiosity. What a joke that she should actually look quite pretty in her

braids the day after her disappointing encounter. Aunt Jane took the collar off her shirt-waist and laid a round collar in its place. This attempt seemed pitiful to Elizabeth, her mind filled with a picture of a tall, lithesome figure, plaid-silk blouse and velvet skirt, beautiful cape and a hat nodding with plumes——

"I'll not let it spoil everything. I won't, I won't," she said to herself with renewed energy. But for all her resolution, it seemed that this hard matter were already accomplished.

She went back to work on Monday morning, carrying with her the discomfort of jealousy and disappointment, but sufficiently herself to escape notice and sympathy. She had never been talkative, so the others in the railroad eating-house expected little of her and she was allowed to pursue her work in silence and thought.

It was getting on toward noon and the work had speeded up to accommodate the rush. Great pans of baked-beans were being put on the heated soapstones set in the rack behind the counter. The roasts were sliced, and the stew served in a big tureen set in a pan of boiling water to keep it hot. Elizabeth put away the ledger in which she had been making entries. She was conscious that some one was standing close watching her. She turned and lifted her head to see the giant form, the big black beard of Hal Younger.

"Aren't you Elizabeth Whittaker?" he asked her in a quiet voice—a voice that held a faint throb of some old seductive note.

"Yes, Mr. Younger," she said politely. "I remember you. You visited my aunt and uncle once on the farm when I was a little girl.

He was silent, leaning on the counter with one elbow, his other hand thrust in his pocket. He wore a big shiny overcoat (called in those days a "pony coat") of horsehair, dyed black. Underneath were the same heavy dark clothes. Elizabeth saw with surprise that his eyes were brown, clear and shapely under the twisted Younger brows.

She did not speak again, waiting for him. After a little silence he turned more fully toward her and leaned his crossed arms on the counter, his big hands with their many black hairs clasped on his own elbows.

"Elizabeth, how long has it been since you saw my brother—Jim?"

She could not speak at once, and when she did, it was with difficulty.

"He was in here Saturday night but I didn't talk to him."

"Was he alone?"

Elizabeth could only shake her head in negation.

"A woman with him?"

She nodded.

"Tall, pretty, with a long cape—and yellow hair?"

She nodded. He stood silent, looking about the room. He put up a hand, stroked his beard, and at last spoke again.

"Elizabeth, Jim used to think a lot of you. He used to talk about you—used to say if he could have a little sister he'd choose you. I wished sometimes that I hadn't been the cause of trouble so't your aunt couldn't be friends with us. If Jim could've had you for a little friend all the time—" He stopped as though he scarcely knew where his own thoughts were leading him.

"Jim has forgotten me," said Elizabeth sadly.

"Jim's headed for trouble," said his brother.

"But I thought you liked him to be wild—troublesome," she protested, confused by his attitude.

"What made you think that?" he asked, staring a little.

Elizabeth could not say, exactly.

"Just what I've heard, I suppose," she answered, trying to blend politeness with the facts. "And I had a feeling—when I was just a little girl and you stayed all night at Auntie's—that you were proud of him, liked him to be just as he was."

"I'm proud of him now," Jim's brother answered staunchly. "I'm not apologizing for Jim. He's the pick of the family—the brightest, the best. That's why I saw to it that he got away and got his proper schooling. He's the kind of metal that improves with working. He'd cut off his hand for me and never say a word before or afterward. He's a man, grown and strong. But I can worry about him, can't I? I can see how the very things that make every one love him can make a wreck of him, can't I?" He was defiant.

"But I don't know what you mean—what have I to do with it?"

"Well, I'm not surprised, because I don't know what I mean myself," he admitted. "I saw him Saturday and followed him, and knew he came here. I kept thinking about him till I went to sleep—kept thinking about him, and the thought kept turning over in my mind—there's that little Elizabeth—she used to think Jim was the whole works—maybe if I talked to her, maybe she could suggest something to me."

"But what? What trouble is he in? What danger?" she asked. A rich red had flooded her cheeks, and she watched him, her blue gaze hanging on his swarthy face.

"Didn't you know who that was with him last night?"

"No. I never saw her before."

"Well," said Hal, "I never did either, but I knew her. She's the richest woman in this town. Her husband is my age—or better. She's crazy—crazy is what I mean. She's the kind that wants the whole works—the rich old husband, the young lover, the grand house and the romantic affair, the social position and the freedom to do as she likes. She wants it all—everything, and she'd swallow Jim like an alligator swallows a frog. Now it isn't seemly, me talking to you like this, but Jim's too good for her. He's got a life of his own, a place to cut for himself. He's got to quit drinking so much and pitch into his work and make that store he has in Waynesville a success. It was my father's own place—and he left it to Jim, and Jim thinks it'll just run itself and stuff his pockets with money. He's got to brace himself and quit being a woman's fool around here, with all the women running after him—I could break his neck, the young fool." He was angry now, and his voice had risen.

"Why don't you tell him all this?" asked Elizabeth.

"Haven't I?" he demanded. "I've told him and told him! And what does he do? He calls me 'papa' and laughs in my face. He comforts me. He says I shouldn't feel so bad about growing old, I've had my fun—he won't take me seriously. I'm going to knock him down some of these days and show him I'm not so old and rickety as he thinks. He won't pay any attention to me."

"Do you think he would—to me?"

"Well, now, that's what I'm getting at. You're a smart girl. Why wouldn't he? Why wouldn't he care what you think?"

Elizabeth could not see her part in Hal Younger's angry and affectionate concern for Jim.

"I don't know what I could do," she said slowly. "I think he's all right just as he is. I think he's able to take care of himself. I don't believe he'd want me to interfere—I can't think what I'd have to say. If it ever just came about in some natural way and he asked me what I thought, I might say something, but Mr. Younger, all I could ever say would be just that I think he's—" She stopped, confused. "No," she said finally, "I couldn't interfere. I don't see how I could. You see I like him—he was always so kind to me. And how would it be for me to tell him he wasn't doing right? How could I do such a thing? And it seems disloyal for you and me to be talking here—I don't think I like you to tell me what's the matter with Jim. Let him alone. He's all right. He'll manage his affairs as he wants them."

"No, he'll not," said Hal Younger, and there was a hopeless note in his voice. "Some woman will manage them for him. He was born to be a woman's fool. If the wrong one gets him, she'll wreck him. If the right one gets him, she'll make a king of him—a prince of men for her own heart's joy. And if you've not the wit nor the gumption to try to take part, you're not the girl for him anyhow."

Elizabeth was very pale.

"He's got to choose for himself," she said, and though her voice faltered, her eyes were bright and firm. "He's

got to choose. I can see how it's all his right. I—thanks for telling me. Maybe things will turn out different than you think. But there's more in Jim than one knows. He can't make a wreck of his life. And as for wit and gumption, Mr. Younger—" Elizabeth paused, scarcely knowing how to voice her instinct in the matter, the instinct which told her that Jim could never have happiness and order unless he found them for himself.

"Poor young 'un," said Hal Younger pityingly. " 'Tisn't right that you should be working here—you just a baby. And it's not right I should come, piling my troubles about Jim on to you, as if you hadn't enough of your own. But something told me—go to Elizabeth—the little one Jim liked so well. See if she can't help you—can't help Jim—can't straighten things out for us all."

Elizabeth sat like one entranced under his kind voice. There came a light in her eyes—the man gazed at her in wonder. It was an old light—but he had not seen it before. Elizabeth had seen it, striking upward from beyond the rim of the world, showing her a bright tower of strength. She had seen it flooding the fields and enfolding her, and now, without her knowledge, it shone forth from her in a gaze pure and shining.

"Maybe I shall help. Maybe the time will come. You just leave it that way, Mr. Younger. Just wait and see if it doesn't come my way to help. But the need of it has to come from Jim himself. I feel as if everything's going to be all right. And you've got to remember another thing: no matter how things look, or what people say, there's nobody anywhere in the world finer than Jim just the way he is."

CHAPTER XV

Spring came along the valley where Coal City lay, not as it came in the country, dancing on a carpet of blue crocuses and singing under the eaves in the heavy nights. Not with colts hidden in the lower pasture and little yellow ducks marching in solemn ridiculous file to the lake. It could not come with quite the poignancy and beauty of the country, but it came with all the thrill that spring brings to town and lane.

The lilacs along the street where Elizabeth walked to work put out little hooded leaves. The old farm cat had three new kittens. The door of the restaurant stood open all day long and showed a glimpse of green North Hill and the wide, white-tufted blue sky.

Elizabeth was seventeen. It was her second spring in town, and although it brought with it nostalgia for the farm, it brought, too, this time, a change in her affairs. The old pain of that night when Jim had looked at her and not seen her, had persisted too long. This was perhaps due to the fact that her life was spent in hard routine unnatural to her years and offered her no diversion with which to heal the wound. Then too, she was grieved to see that Aunt Jane was rapidly losing physical and mental stamina with the passing of the months in town. The old lady grew daily more vague, more lost in an old world of remembrance, so that her touch with

Elizabeth was kept alive only by the strong bond of their love for each other.

But God in His goodness had not forgotten the little girl, and into this monotonous state of affairs He cast the adventure of friendship, a companion young and warm, to love and be near her, some one to walk with on the lovely spring Sundays, to laugh with in her idle hours. It was "Teacher," that same Annie Smail who had taught Elizabeth to bound the state of North Dakota, by "The Province of Manitoba, Canada, on the north," etc. The same Annie Smail who had had such a terrific encounter with Ole on the old front porch.

She was "Teacher" now in a four-room school in Coal City, and she came to Aunt Jane's for room and board. They were glad to have a woman, and Aunt Jane, coming out of her abstraction to notice Elizabeth's delight, agreed to lay aside her old fundamental dislike for any one as bumptious as Annie, and cook her meals and clean her room each day. Annie was now twenty-five or so, and while this was a good deal older than seventeen, it was infinitely younger than sixty.

Annie Smail was frivolous and irresponsible, full of noisy fun. Elizabeth's hard life and sturdy character had made her more steady than other girls her age, so that they struck a comfortable basis. Indeed, Annie was the more immature of the two, but Elizabeth's persistent smallness made this unnoticed. For the child could not grow. She drank milk, she rubbed the back of her neck every night, she even prayed, but grow she did not. She admired Annie's tall robust beauty with fervor and never dreamed that there were people whose ideal of feminine loveliness was something quite different from Annie.

Annie had company—an ever new "gentleman friend" to sit in the little parlor and talk by the hour. She had a zither on which she would play the languid popular tunes of the day and accompany herself while she sang in a sentimental tone. She had a trunk full of pretty clothes and four hats!—an extravagance of possession that dizzied Elizabeth.

Elizabeth was allowed to practise on the zither and try on the hats. The two girls sang together, leaning against each other on the back steps. And Elizabeth, the whole world changed by the noisy coming and going of this lively creature, began to bloom, even if she could not grow tall.

School closed. Annie was planning to go to Waynesville for her holidays to visit an aunt there, but just as she was ready to start she received an invitation—one had been sent to every teacher in the county—to the annual big garden party at Thorne's.

Thorne was a politician; born and reared in the Dakotas when all was shifting, changing growth, he had risen from the poverty of a sod house on the prairies to power and strength. He owned coal mines, wheat lands, cattle ranches. He was a coming leader in the political powers of the young state; a lawyer, whose law had been learned as a half-starved clerk at the bar. His wealth and fame were not free from the odium of unscrupulous methods and tyrannical power. Loreen, Thorne's wife, was an eastern woman from a brilliant family. She had succumbed to her husband's dynamic personality and the promise of his riches; had become the social arbiter of a circle which included most of the rich and powerful families in the state. Her home was pretentious, her affairs

elaborate. Thorne himself was too shrewd to affect any style. All the country-side was invited to the big garden party held every year. Farmers and bankers, mine operators and school-teachers, folks of all kinds, muslin dresses brushing against whispering silks, boots and corduroys, beside the stiff black broadcloth of the élite.

"Elizabeth," Annie cried, the night she received the invitation, "you must come with me. Everybody goes. We can easily walk in on this. They never know who's there, anyhow. I went two years ago and it was wonderful. I'll not go unless you do."

Elizabeth had been thinking of the farm all day for it would soon be time to put the binders in the wheat. She could think of nothing except the ripple and sway and living color of a field of ripening grain. Ole had been into the restaurant. He had a couple of men to help him harvest and was hunting for a cook, a Chinaman, perhaps. Elizabeth, looking into his great obstinate face with its small eyes and golden beard, its heaviness and vast kindness, had been smitten with such vivid remembrance of her childhood that she trembled.

The restaurant, her perch behind the change counter, the shifting procession of strange faces, the echo of the interminable quarrel between Mr. Stuart and the cook, seemed a vacant dream from which she would awaken into some strange happiness she knew would be her own.

The illusions of her life diminishing, she would rouse at the song of the meadow-larks in the wild-rose hedges, leap from her bed in the old loft, run barefoot down the stairs out into the dew and the golden morning light. Then on down to the lake, sparkling through the trees under the vast blue sky, while all around was the golden sea of the grain.

It was an unconscious effort to reconstruct the simplicity and happiness of childhood, and she was so wrapped in her dream that she seemed to come back from a great distance to hear Annie's beseeching voice. For all the way home these poignant dreams had argued for the possibility of marrying Ole, after all, and going home again. She was old enough, now, to be married, and she thought in her simplicity that the definite act of returning to the farm as Ole's wife would forever, forever stop the futile dreams and longing for Jim Younger.

"Party?" she said dully, "I've never been to a party. What could I wear?"

"That's just why you're such a dreamy baby," said Annie. "You've never been to a party. Imagine—and you're seventeen. You're too good for any use, Elizabeth. As for a dress—there's my rose taffeta. It's all burst out at the seams, but the pieces would cut down beautifully, and Aunt Jane can make it. With some new lace for the sleeves—"

"I think you ought to go," said Aunt Jane, fondly. "You are getting to be a young lady, and you must have some pleasure. We were always invited. Uncle would never go, but I think you might."

Elizabeth allowed herself to be carried along. The rose taffeta with its slit seams, was cut into new small pieces. Aunt Jane, with scissors and needle, began to devise a dress, and Elizabeth stood on a chair in her full white petticoat, her tight little bodice, her braided hair about her head. None of them knew how pretty she was with her shapely little hands and feet, the graceful turn of wrist and ankle. Her head, bound with its coronet of braids, was as small and round as the heads of famous

beauties, and in the blue eyes there seemed to burn the crocuses of spring, warm in the grass beneath the wide deep sky.

Yet Annie and Elizabeth and Aunt Jane were all of the same opinion: she was undersized, insignificant, lacking in the high bloom and buoyancy considered lovely then. Elizabeth felt that the rose silk was too gay for her. Aunt Jane herself was doubtful, but beggars can not be choosers, and a dress was a dress, if Annie were generous enough to give it. It would take all Elizabeth could afford to buy new slippers.

At work the next day, Elizabeth did not think about the ripeness of the late July wheat and the summer heat dancing over the hay-fields, but she thought about the new dress and the party. A possibility that she was afraid to touch or face quivered in the back of her mind, for all the gossip about Jim Younger left her unchanged toward him.

Although the Dakotas had gone into the Union ostensibly dry, it was a common enough thing then as now for a man to drink—the Canadian border was so close, the surveillance, lax. All the talk Elizabeth had heard about the bad habits of the Younger men was incomprehensible to her. She had often seen farmers in the restaurant unsteady of feet, drinking coffee to fortify themselves for the long drive in the bitter cold, so that she was not properly revolted, properly warned by what she had heard. That the youngest son of a big family of boys might be completely ruined by a standard of manliness that called for drinking all others under the table, for loud arrogant talk and boasting made good, she did not know, because her complete innocence made it impos-

sible for her to know. She had seen and felt only the vivid contact with a bright mind, sympathetic understanding, compassion, a caress and a reaching, when she had most needed them. These were to her the real Jim, and since the night she had seen him in company with a lovely woman, her heart had awakened, and she had realized how attractive as a lover he would be. Her childhood worship had altered into something more real, a need more personal and deep, full of possibilities which charmed and fascinated her, but which she dare not touch with the fastidious mind that was hers. Yet she knew he would be tender, gay, compassionate, full of perfect understanding. She never believed that he would really look at her, yet inevitably she continued to dream.

The rose dress was finished. It stood about her in its stiff fullness, pulled in at her little waist, the small breasts preening above the high tight sash, the neck-line barely below the column of her throat, her arms bared from the elbow below a tremendous puff of sleeve. There was new lace at the neck,—a wanton extravagance. No wrap was needed in the summer heat so she might go bareheaded.

Before the mirror, for one breathless moment, she almost realized her sweet youthful beauty—almost saw the fulfillment she had striven for that day long ago, when she thrust Aunt Jane's rolled stocking in her hair.

But this vain moment passed when Annie appeared. She had on a dress of bright green satin, covered from top to bottom with tiny ruffles of hand-sewed lace. Her fair hair was done in a roll that would have amazed Madame Pompadour herself, and she wore a huge white hat which sailed forward from the back of her head like

a great wave rolling to its crest. She walked with a mincing gait, which she imagined was like that of fashionable ladies from the "effete East," then just beginning to be the model of ambitious western women whose husbands were amassing fortunes in the rich new lands.

Annie was stunning, and she knew it. The girls both kissed Aunt Jane, who was in a flutter of excitement. Then they left the little white house and walked together in the summer twilight down the long High Street to Thorne's big house on the edge of town.

They could see the town lying on the slopes of the valley, the coal mines cut into the face of the hill across the river, the railroad and the stream running cheek by jowl through the hills. As they walked along the face of the slope, the town broke into twinkling lights, locomotives snorted and clanged in the bottom and great barges of coal moved slowly on the sluggish water.

"It's lovely," said Elizabeth softly, breathlessly, squeezing Annie's hand. "I feel—my heart is beating so—it's wonderful, Annie."

"You poor kid," said Annie. "Just think—you've never been to a party! The parties I've been to! The men I've known!"

Annie was always boasting, and Elizabeth was glad to listen.

"You'll have a grand time, Elizabeth," said Annie, encouragingly. "There'll be dancing on the lawn, and it's the custom to speak to any one. I'll introduce you to those I know. And you're pretty, and you're so young"—this almost wistfully—"I know you'll have partners to spare. Just laugh a lot and don't say much, but smile and look up and laugh at anything. You're a pretty

thing, honest you are, Elizabeth. You look so sweet in that little dress—I'm awfully glad you're going. I—I don't know anybody, not in the whole world, I think as much of as I do you, Elizabeth."

"Why, Annie!"

"I do," said the beautiful Annie. "I think you're all wrong about everything. I think you're a fool, working as you do and giving all your money to that old woman and being so dutiful and quiet. You'll never get anywhere. You've got to learn to look out for yourself. I can't help loving you—just because you are such a young idiot, but I wish you'd wake up and look around, and see what the world's like. I'm out for myself all the time. I want somebody with money, and I'll find him, too. I'm going to take care of Annie Smail because nobody else will. It makes me sick—the way you work, the poor time you have. If I hadn't come here to organize you a little better, you would just have dried up and blown away. Promise me you're going to have a good time to-night and a lot of good times from now on. I want you to keep your money for yourself. Your aunt's got money tucked away, I'll bet a million. Let her spend a little of it—"

She paused, incoherent. The dusk had deepened about them.

"Never mind, honey," said Annie, with abrupt tenderness. "You're all right. I suppose me trying to advise you is kind of a joke—somehow. You know more, just without learning, than I'll ever get on to. But it seems you don't get an even break. That's what Jim Younger said to me once about you. 'The cards are stacked against her,' he said. He felt it, just as I do."

"I remember," said Elizabeth. "I didn't know what he meant, then."

"You don't know now. But what a pig I am, making you blue on the way to your first party. You're a little love, Elizabeth. Don't pay any attention to me."

CHAPTER XVI

THEY had come to the big gate. Twilight was gone and the star-strewn summer night was about them. It was hot, but a breeze stirred, and far off there was a rumble of thunder.

A cowboy in full regalia stood at the gate and looked at the card presented to him. He smiled and winked at Annie and passed the girls through without a word. It was the custom that the cattle-riders on Thorne's big ranches should come in chaps and spurs and Stetsons to these affairs. They could be seen here and there among the gathering crowds, giving a picturesqueness to the night, which was lit with torches and lanterns hung among the trees.

Other figures were appearing rapidly. Annie and Elizabeth moved among the groups to the big house and were received in a long line of guests who shook hands with the perspiring host and his sister and passed on out into the hospitality of the gardens.

In the garden was a platform for dancing. An old fiddler, tapping his foot, bowing and swaying over his violin, called out the country dances. The very select danced in the house in Mrs. Thorne's ballroom. Here the floor was of waxed hard wood, so rare in Coal City that there was nothing with which to compare it. The fiddlers sat on chairs and a gentleman called the dances.

In the gardens the fun was growing. A crowd of young people gathered around the end of the dancing platform, hanging back, looking for partners, waiting for others to begin. There were more men than girls, a necessary division for a dancing party, as men like the spirit of competition, and women love being in demand. The two girls were greeted with smiles and jests and a man near the wooden steps spoke to Annie.

"Hello, Annie Smail!" he cried, and shook hands with her.

There was frank admiration in his black eyes for her tall good looks. Elizabeth, pressing against her with a weight of shyness, saw a man with long drooping mustaches and a beak of a nose, a man older than most of those around them. Annie greeted him with high cries of astonishment and then dragged Elizabeth forth bodily, like an awkward child.

"This is my school superintendent, Mr. Mock, Elizabeth. This is Elizabeth Whittaker, old Hiram Whittaker's niece. She went to my first school, Joe. I brought her to the party with me."

The man gave Elizabeth a brief look, then signaled to a gangling youth in chaps.

"Harry, come meet a couple of friends of mine—"

And sooner than Elizabeth could appreciate, Annie was on the platform dancing, and Elizabeth and Harry stood shyly alone in the crowd.

"Dance?" he asked her, after the immemorial manner, but Elizabeth was afraid.

"This is my first party," she explained to him. "I can't dance. You go ahead and find a partner."

He gave her the frightened look of a young man who

fears he is saddled with a wallflower, then abruptly left her for a girl who had just come laughingly into the light of the torches, her azure skirts spreading like the sea about her.

Elizabeth found herself lost amid broad backs. She drew softly, quietly away from the dancing platform. She found the tall guests around her scattering, and she retreated in little darts and dashes. The moon cast a solid shadow beneath a great lilac bush not far away.

Seized with sudden wild shyness, she darted into this, saw too late the glow of a burning cigar and collided with a man somewhat taller than herself, a broad warm young man, smelling of tobacco and whisky. It brought back to her with dizzying impact the memory of Aunt Jane's hot little kitchen on a bitter winter night.

"Well, well," said the rich voice, with all the old vibrations that sent Elizabeth singing like a harp in the wind. An arm enfolded her and held her with light playful strength.

"This is what I've always expected, an angel right out of heaven, fallen into my arms in a summer darkness. What a bit of a thing you are! Here, don't pull away, I didn't know there was such a dainty little woman left in the world. Come to the edge of the shadow, so that I may see you."

He drew her to where the moonlight shone through a chink in the upper leaves and turned her so that the silver glow fell on her little frightened face. His arm grew slack about her and fell away. She was free, but she could not run.

"I ought to know you," he said, after a moment's silence. "I'm sure I know you. You're somebody quite

important—why, you're my little girl who hadn't even a doll—you're Elizabeth—"

"Elizabeth Whittaker, Mr. Younger," she said faintly, and caught in the wavering light the surprise on his face.

"Of course!" he exclaimed, and though he did not raise his voice, it possessed all the excitement of a shout. "My little dream child—I wondered if you'd gone back to heaven so soon! But how long is it? You ought to be tall by now. Have you grown an inch? And did you get your doll? It was dressed in pink muslin, if you can imagine such a thing. I took it to a friend in Coal City, and she made it a red woolen dress that buttoned all down the back. I knew you'd want to take its clothes off. It had pins holding the thin pink stuff, pins that stuck right into the body! Brutal, I thought! But—I know you got the doll, for you thanked me for it the day I got Emanuel Christian for you. What an adventure, meeting you again! It makes me feel like a boy. The doll came all the way from Paris. I wonder if I'd take the trouble to buy a little girl a doll nowadays? Likely not. I'm not the same youngster I used to be. Where is the doll, little Elizabeth? Thrown on some rubbish heap and long ago forgotten, I'll wager. But of course you won't admit that."

"Do you remember the little stool you sat on that night in Auntie's kitchen?" she asked, breathlessly, running swiftly up the stairs of remembrance with him.

"Yes, I remember I got as far away from your good uncle as I could. The smell of a sinner was offensive to him."

"The doll sits on that stool in my own room now, on a clean white handkerchief. She is just as lovely as ever,

except that one cheek has faded a little where I nursed her against my arm, and she's lost one button off her dress. She sits there where she can look out at the stars."

"Then you've never played with her?"

"Why, of course," she answered firmly. "Every day. And washed and ironed her dress and made her a little nightgown and a white dress for summer. But she always liked the red dress best and so did I. I still play with her, although I'm seventeen and ought not admit it."

"Why, bless your heart!" he cried in delight. "Never deny a charming thing like that! And you are still in braids after all? And seventeen? What an age for a woman! She ought to stay there for at least ten years, and then be eighteen for another ten, and never go beyond it. Your hair is beautiful, Elizabeth. It makes you look like a princess, a little queen among ordinary women."

He touched her hair with a light caress, and his warm hand lingered on her head, filling her with strange delight. Her budding beauty bloomed into reality under his praise, her eyes became liquid starlight, her cheeks two soft warm prairie roses.

"You're still a baby," he teased her, and put a forefinger under her chin to tilt her face up to the light again.

"Not I," she answered. "I've earned my own living for a year and a half."

"And what can you do to earn money—you little treasure?"

She told him. He was silent a few moments. Something in his altered attitude swept her back to the high wagon seat, to the dark red anger that burned on his face when she told him of her lonely vigil with her uncle. But when he spoke, it was in a gentle practical voice.

"Fifty cents a day is not enough. You can't buy pretty buckles and ribbons, such as young girls need, out of that. Could you keep books? Make entries and write letters for a business man?"

"I'm good at figures," she answered. "I keep a ledger for Mr. Stuart all the time, and my handwriting is neat. I could get a dictionary to help me spell."

"I can get you a job then," he told her. "There's a new hardware and implement wholesale house opening up here in Coal City, right now. The office is furnished, and a man I know has the say about the jobs. The manager is an enemy of mine, but he needn't know I sent you. They'll give you seven or eight dollars a week. That's more than school-teachers make in some places. You'll have to work hard, but it will be private and not like restaurant work. That's not suitable for you."

It was all back again—the practical working magic of his thoughtfulness. He could not draw near her, speak to her, without his generous heart performing some miracle. They were old friends now. The past, that had become so dim and unreal to her, was vivid and present.

"Thank you, Jim," she said, her breath just a stir of the summer night.

"I've been thinking of the farm lately—so much. I'd so love to see the wheat again—"

"I know," he said, and the wonderful thing was that he did. "I know how you feel. I'll come and take you into the country next Sunday. We'll drive all day. Shall we take the doll along?"

"Oh, Mr. Younger. How kind!"

"No," he said, "I've decided not to take you after all. I won't even look at you, if you don't call me Jim."

She was flung into despair by his abrupt refusal, and now laughter bubbled in her when he gave it this turn.

"I'll call you Jim," she promised, a trace of guile awakening in her soft voice.

"Good," he answered, and laughed at her.

They stood in silence. The music of the fiddles beat over them. Off among the trees, crowds were gathering, laughing, playing.

"Now I'm going to ask a favor of you, Elizabeth. The rest of your evening must be mine. To make a perfect party for you, you must dance. I'll take you to the indoors ballroom."

"Oh, I can't. I've never danced—except alone on the farm."

"Nonsense. Of course you can dance. You're not seventeen without some of its abilities. I'll teach you here on the grass, then we'll go on the platform and practise, then I'll take you inside. I've got a card for the house."

He began to teach her, prancing and stepping off the paces to the sound of the tantalizing fiddles. He called the dance softly to her and Elizabeth, after a bewildering moment, yielded to his instruction.

They crowded close to the platform to watch and then went on the floor and danced a quadrille. Everybody made room for Jim, Elizabeth saw with pride. The men spoke his name, eager for his greeting, the women watched him. They danced, and it was true that at seventeen she needed little practise, for her feet tripped lightly, her little body, sturdy and strong from years of work, swayed and bowed, forward and back, round and round. They danced the Virginia reel and other old

square dances, always popular with such a crowd, and he taught her to two-step and waltz.

He was almost thirty, a man who had been thrust into a man's hard life for fifteen years, who knew all of the darker side of human passion and dismay. She was just seventeen, strange to the world, absurdly innocent and good. But with the facility of his temperament and the kindness of his imagination, he entered into her evening. He became, for those brief hours, a proper ideal escort for a young girl. He did not leave her, as the dancing threw the hours swiftly together into a bright pattern of joy.

She found Annie and told her she was going into the house with Jim.

"Go ahead, baby," Annie answered softly, "I've got a big date of my own. I'll see you at supper."

They went into the great house, a house like a palace, and up the wide polished stairs and into the ballroom, where lights shone in the chandeliers and the waxed floor was spotted with the reflection of colored gowns. On this floor, dancing was like dreaming. Jim introduced her to a great many kind people, always laying great stress on her uncle and his distinction, so that Uncle Whittaker sounded like some grand patron and people were impressed, she saw.

When they had waltzed together twice, and had sat together twice and talked in the rapid flow of gathering intimacy, and when Jim had visited and revisited the great punch bowl that stood in a small booth at one side of the dancing floor, they had an encounter that almost wrecked the evening for Elizabeth.

She had relaxed completely, yielding to his wishes in

every smallest thing, incredibly happy and gay. She had traveled for that evening from a tardy adolescence into the power and surety of Eve. All the wine and witchery of youth was free in her, so that she laughed and called to her partners, her voice ringing with a new note. It would have been impossible for her to have been so gay, so trusting, with any one else in the world, she knew, but Jim.

"Come and drink some punch," he said to her, but she shook her head.

"I'm neither hungry nor thirsty, Jim," she told him. "I'm—I'm satisfied."

"Here is our hostess who has been somewhere—I want you to meet her. She's an old friend of mine and will be kind to you, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth turned to follow him, then stopped and swayed a little.

Here was the beauty who had been with Jim that night so long ago. With a great effort she forced herself forward and stood before the lovely lady.

"Loreen, this is an old friend of mine—a child I helped to rear—Elizabeth Whittaker, whose uncle was once of great help to Mr. Thorne. Elizabeth, this is our hostess, Mrs. Thorne. I knew you would forgive me if I imposed on your kindness a little."

"Certainly, Jim," said Loreen Thorne. "Any friend of yours is welcome at any time. My dear child, I am happy to have you here, and hope you will enjoy the dancing."

"Thank you," said Elizabeth, and restrained the impulse to curtsy.

There was a short silence. The child, with a frozen

smile, looked at this other woman—the kind, Hal Younger said, who wanted everything. He had called her an alligator, but he was a vulgar man. She was not an alligator. She was lovely, Annie's age, or more, with all the beauty and poise and strength that Annie longed for with such passionate futility.

Her eyes, smiling into Elizabeth's, were brown and clear, but bright, not soft. Her smiling lips were controlled, and in the creamy whiteness of her skin, the pale splendor of her hair, there were real beauty, refinement, elegance. She wore a black velvet dress, cut daringly over her arms and bosom. It was the first "princess" dress Elizabeth had ever seen.

Mrs. Thorne turned to Jim and tapped him on the arm with the black plume fan she carried.

"I want to see you, Jim," she said, with a playful manner. "I have been wondering where you were."

"I'm going to take care of this young one for a bit, Loreen," he answered, and so easy was his tone that instead of refusal it seemed only postponement, only request, asked with understanding that she would yield.

"But of course," she replied, and looked at Elizabeth again. "That will give you until eleven o'clock, when Miss Whittaker will want to join her friends in the garden. I'll save a place for you down-stairs."

Jim's face grew red, and his head tilted with a new look—a haughty one.

"Thank you, but I'm going into the garden to-night," he said, and sweeping an arm about Elizabeth, said to her with a laugh, "Come on and dance, little one."

But her feet were stumbling. She wanted to get away from this place at once, and divining her wish, he

led her down the stairs and out by a door through the dining-room, on to a moonlit terrace. There was a stone bench there and, beyond, a swinging seat hung from a tree. They sat down. Elizabeth spoke her mind at once.

"I've seen Mrs. Thorne before," she said.

"Where?" he asked.

"At the railroad restaurant, with you. One night—long ago. Winter before last. I was working there then, but you didn't speak to me."

"I remember the time," he replied, steadily. "It was a very indiscreet thing to do. It was when I first knew her, and we met on the street and walked. She wanted some kind of a lark, but I was afraid of gossip, so we went there, where no one would be likely to see us. It was a harmless escapade, Elizabeth, but people are quick to think evil of a woman like her—beautiful and rich and prominent."

"I didn't," she said, and then added softly, "but it wasn't because I was generous. It was because of you, Jim. I knew if she was with you, everything was all right. I knew you'd take care of her. You always did of me. It's your way. You wouldn't hurt any one. But I want you to go back in the house and not stay out here with me. You've been more than kind, and I know it. But now she's expecting you and she's more claim on you than I. She's one of your grown-up friends and I'm just a—a child you helped to rear."

Her voice was steady, her wish for him to go back, sincere. But Jim shook his head. His arms were folded now over his chest, and his eyes were dark with something she couldn't understand.

"It isn't just that," he replied, after a moment. "She—

she tries to boss me about, and I'll not have it. You see, Elizabeth, there are certain rules—every one knows that. You are my guest, and I am hers. If she doesn't accept you, then she hasn't accepted me. She tries to compel me, again and again, to ignore the rules for conduct that I've set for myself and yield to hers which are arbitrary, whimsical."

Elizabeth understood with increasing discomfort that his attendance was not loyalty to her, but an old quarrel with Mrs. Thorne. She said nothing, seeking deep within her own heart for understanding. She was wise enough to find no comfort in this evidence of quarreling, for it indicated a strong attraction, a temptation to yield, on his part, to a domination he feared, yet which drew him.

"I'm not as nice as you think I am, Elizabeth," he was saying, as he took her cold hand in his own and laid it against his rough cheek. "I've not protected her, not taken care of her—not as I would you. She's a different sort of creature. One's at war with her. She's able to care for herself, to give and withhold with her own free will, to seek and find and take what she wants. If one gains an advantage—it's a victory, not an abuse—"

He paused, fearing his own free running tongue.

"But come!" He rose, drew her hand within his arm and turned down the path. "The clock is going to strike eleven soon, and the supper bells will ring all through the garden. Let's go back to the pavilion and dance again. It's cooler out here than it is in the house. The special guests, I fear, have the worst of it. How cold you are! Elizabeth, tell me, have I hurt you? Have I been awkward?"

He stopped again, turning and stooping above her.

"I know what you are thinking. You think I would have left the house with any one, just as I did with you. That hurts you. Dear, it is true, but it is also true that she offended me especially, when she made a distinction against you. I shall not forgive her for it. You are my own little sister, my treasure. I've always felt that you were special, somehow, and she could not have hurt me worse. Tell me that you are going to forget it and be happy again, as you were before."

She could not refuse his warm pleading. She *had* to be happy again because he so unreasonably asked it of her. There was a difference, something far back in her heart that she would have to examine when she was alone. But now she smiled as she walked hand in hand with him under the trees. Listening to him talk, her heart was reassured and asked no further proof of tenderness than his words. He wanted to feel that she had not been hurt. So, she wasn't hurt—she hadn't been.

They stopped at the booths along a kind of avenue in the garden. Jim joked and laughed with the girls and men in attendance and bought a number of trinkets for Elizabeth, so that her arms were soon full of fans and toys. Before they reached the dance floor again, Elizabeth began to sense a difference in him. His voice was never loud, but into it had crept a note of excitement and change.

She could not name or define her feeling, but it seemed that since they left the house, some part of him had withdrawn, and this withdrawing of the spirit had continued unperceived until there was left only the bright shell of his personality, keeping up, with a certain cunning wariness, the dignity and kindness of his actions.

It was the incipient stage of drunkenness, but she did not know it. She did not know that the punch she had refused had been strong, that he was becoming dangerous, uncertain of himself. He seemed to fear his own talking, yet grew more garrulous. They danced again, and her weight on his arm was different. She was not the feather she had been earlier in the evening. He almost leaned upon her now instead of carrying her along. Coming off the floor with him, bewildered, seized by some new pain whose origin was mysterious to her, Elizabeth saw, with relief, Annie walking with Mr. Mock, their faces shining with happiness.

"There's Annie," she said to Jim. But some man on the other side had drawn Jim's attention. He had something in his hand. He made a tilting gesture with his head and laughed and wiped his lips.

"Go on to Annie, I'll join you in a moment," Jim said to Elizabeth, pushing her slightly, so that she was compelled to walk away from him.

"Have you had a good time, Elizabeth? Have you been in the house?" asked Annie eagerly. Her companion had her arm linked in his own. He looked at Elizabeth kindly.

"Yes, I've been in the house dancing with Jim. Then we came out here again. Where have you been, Annie? What have you been doing?"

Annie and her escort looked at each other and laughed, and then looked at Elizabeth again, so that she smiled in their pleasure.

"Ole is here," Annie told her. "I saw him a little while ago, but did not get a chance to speak to him. He was wandering about all alone, dressed up like the very dickens."

"Ole here!" exclaimed Elizabeth, and then realized with surprise that his presence was more legitimate than her own. He was a landholder, a voter, a naturalized citizen, while she was lost among the insignificant group of poor working people. How strange was such a fact, put in such a way! But her inheritance was such that facts did not count, and she persisted in her feeling that her presence at the party was more natural than his. As she stood, thinking, she heard his voice behind her.

"You have goot time?" he asked her, grinning and bobbing his head. He had on a hot dark store-suit, with a stiff white shirt and a flowing bright blue tie.

"Why, Ole, how nice you look! Why didn't you tell me that you were coming to this party?"

He was embarrassed.

"I t'ink maybe little 'Lizabet' not come. T'ink maybe Ole hurt the feelings. Mr. Thorne my friend," he boasted. "He come all the way to my farm, in horse and buggy, to give me invite."

"That's fine, Ole. Teacher is here. You remember her, don't you?"

She turned to make room for him to greet the others. She felt at once that Annie was proud to exhibit so presentable a gentleman friend as Mr. Mock to her old enemy, Ole. But Ole took no offense at her high ways. His face was so red, anyhow, that no one could tell when he blushed. He did not offer to shake hands, but bobbed his head with heavy awkwardness. Elizabeth felt a certain pity for him.

"Ole is an old friend of mine, Mr. Mock," she said, looking up at Annie's beau. "He has been my friend since I was a little girl. And Annie's, too," she added, wishing to make Ole more comfortable.

Mr. Mock laughed, his bright black eyes searching Ole's thick face and body. His thin beak of a nose seemed to give a very snort of disdain, to which Ole's thick spreading nostrils could make no reply. But Annie had a gift for loyalty.

"Yes," she said, with real graciousness, "Emanuel Christian is my old friend. He's a real man—and always was before he learned to speak a word of English!"

Ole's glittering eyes were on her now. He made a small gesture with his hands, then dropped them at his sides. Mr. Mock yielded to Annie's attitude and struck out his hand.

"I'm glad to know you," he said, but Ole did not see him. He was staring at Annie, drinking in the meaning of her daring words. The color ran up into the woman's cheeks like bright banners. She withdrew a step, turned her back and walked off with her escort.

"Now, Ole," scolded Elizabeth, "you behave. I'm not going to beat you about the head with a stick again. Remember who you are and don't let Annie tease you. She's my friend, and you are always getting off on the wrong foot with her. Let her go. She likes that man. What do you care?"

"Me?" said Ole, and his loud voice carried. "I don't care. I threw her away long ago. It's little 'Lizabet' Ole loves now, the nice good kind one that makes Ole behave. You dance with me?"

She looked about for Jim but he was nowhere in sight. The fiddler called out a last dance before supper. The couples crowded about the floor, not shy now, as they had been earlier. Already small groups were moving under the trees, down toward the tables. Elizabeth found

that she could not refuse Ole. They went on the floor and began to dance. She was amazed at the facility with which he took his part. His great body, that had sent an ogre's shadow over the plowed fields when he sowed the wheat, was now enlivened by a sprightly gaiety. He danced and pranced as he became intoxicated with the fiddling. Before the dance was over, he began to throw his heels about with force and speed, and to shout and clasp his hands. Every one else imitated him, so that the dance became rowdy and Elizabeth was hurled recklessly about.

At the end, the fiddler, with a sweep of his bow, sent them all off the floor but Ole. Then, crouching a little at the knees, he began to play new music, a jig that few of them had ever heard, a mad, quick thing. A shout went up from the crowd. Elizabeth found herself caught in a thrill of excitement as Ole began to dance alone on the smooth pine boards.

Now he was a different person. All his strength became flowing grace. His thick shoulders and stout legs belonged to him, belonged to the dance. His feet quickened, his elbows jerked, his fingers snapped. He flung back his head, grinning with delight, as he jigged madly, capriciously, with increasing power. The fiddle jerked to a stop. Ole flung out his arms and spun on his heel, then shouted, leaped into the air, clicked his heels together and sprang over the platform railing into the grass.

There was a great deal of exclamation and applause. The fiddler began to put caps on the torches about the dance floor. Elizabeth, down in the grass with others, found Ole beside her.

"You eat supper with me?" he cried, full of self-confidence, and he seized her arm and drew her along with him. She looked about, still hoping for Jim, but could not see him anywhere. But she noticed that the people around them were staring at Ole, and some of them were laughing. She wondered, uneasily, if her two partners had made her conspicuous between them, and the thought that they were laughing at Ole, caused a strong protective instinct to flare up in her. She definitely abandoned her search for Jim, slipped her hand within Ole's arm and forgot her shyness in her effort to lend him countenance from her own dignity.

The crowded tables were placed in an open space among the trees, lighted with lanterns hung overhead. There was a hubbub of talk and laughter here. Ole found a place for her on a bench at one end of the last table and swung her neatly over the bench into place. He stood behind her, and they began to eat from the trays of fried chickens and the mountain of sandwiches. There were no separate plates, but everybody took the excellent food in his hands and ate, as at a picnic. Steaming pots of coffee were set here and there amid piled cups and saucers, and the guests poured and passed for one another.

"Perhaps he has gone into the house," thought Elizabeth. There was a banquet there, with silver and glass on fine white linen, and the governor of the state at the head of the table.

"You do not eat—even the little sparrows eat—there is fine cake there, and pie all cut for little ones who can not take meat," said Ole, his voice low and kind.

Elizabeth reached for the dark cake and paused, a piece in her hand, to stare at Jim, who had appeared in

some strange way in the torch-lighted space between the tables.

She could scarcely believe her eyes. His appearance had altered unbelievably in the half-hour since he had left her. The hilarity and noisy fun induced by the punch-bowl had been altered into something ugly and sinister.

The withdrawing of the Jim she knew and loved had been complete,—even the shell of him was gone, and here was a monster she knew nothing of. The red mark of anger was on his brow. His fine, dandy's clothing was in disarray, the coat on sidewise, so that the buttons gaped, the big silk cravat twisted on his winged collar.

His appearance caused a startled silence, and then some man called softly, cajolingly:

"Come, Jim, no rough-house. You're drunk, man. Better go away and sleep it off."

"Who's got my girl?" said Jim, and his voice had altered too—flat now, and harsh, and queerly, exaggeratedly, distinct. Elizabeth felt all the blood drain from her heart and then leap back in a great bound.

"You didn't bring any girl, Jim." The man with the soft voice rose now and came forward. It was Hal Younger, Elizabeth saw. He seemed rejuvenated by excitement. He had a swagger of assurance about himself, an insolence equal to Jim's.

"Don't tell me my affairs," said Jim distinctly. "Who's taken my little girl away from me?"

Elizabeth leaned forward, her hands on the table. She intended to rise and to go to Jim, to placate him, but she found that hands like steel were on her shoulders, and that she could not move. She twisted and looked up

indignantly, into Ole's massive inscrutable face. He made a slight grimace, protruding his lips a little, and hissing silence at her. She yielded, as she could not move and would not cry out.

Jim came forward with a step that pranced a little, and suddenly everything happened. He had raised both his arms above his head as though to swing an axe, and, his fists clenched, he rushed at his brother. They began to fight. There were outcries at the table, and men sprang up to intervene. At the first rush it seemed that Jim would bear his opponent down, but the other stepped back, planting a clean blow over one of Jim's eyes. He staggered, fell back heavily and could not rise.

"Sit still! I get him. I care for him. Do not fear," said Ole swiftly, in her ear, then left her. She saw him lift the figure of Jim in his great arms, turn and carry him away through the crowd, which fell back and made easy room for them, with Hal Younger, white and astonished, following.

CHAPTER XVII

THE rest of the garden party was a terrible dream—a thing out of nightmare and darkness. How long she sat before she found strength to leave the table, she did not know, but the confusion, the comment about her, did not sort itself out and become intelligible until hours later. She sensed a definite command in Ole's words to her. It was necessary that she should not be identified with this unpleasant scene.

People began to eat and drink again, to laugh and play, their excitement increased by this dramatic incident. A good many comments were made about Jim Younger.

"What's he doing out here, anyhow? I thought he sat at the big table in the house whenever there were guests."

"Sober as a judge for weeks at a time and the best fellow alive. Then he starts drinking, and goes wild. He'll kill somebody one of these days and hang by the neck. Good thing Hal was here. I doubt if anybody else could have stopped him."

"He'll soon find he's not wanted in good company, if he can't hold his liquor like a gentleman. The Thornes won't forgive him——"

"From what I've heard, the Missus would forgive him anything——"

There was uncertain laughter at this, and the matter dropped. Elizabeth did not even pretend to eat, sitting

so small and invisible among them. She believed, now, all that she had ever heard of Jim Younger—she could even believe that old incredible story of six months in jail which had seemed such a terrible mistake to the little girl.

She believed it all, she even began, dimly, to understand it, but it had only an intensifying effect on her feelings. To see Jim, the omnipotent one, lying on the grass, disgraced and drunk, lifted and carried away in Ole's great arms, aroused in her no disgust, no indignation, but only purest pity.

She left the table as soon as others began to go, saw Annie looking for her and joined her, clinging to Annie's arm, as to anchorage.

"Do you want to go home, Elizabeth?" asked Annie. "Are you tired?"

"Isn't it time—isn't the party over?" It seemed to Elizabeth that days and nights had passed since they walked down the High Street a few hours before.

"There will be dancing until morning," said Mr. Mock. "Don't go yet, Annie. Stay and dance with me."

"We'll have to take Elizabeth home first. She has to work in the morning while I can lie and sleep all day."

Elizabeth protested, but Annie was firm, so her escort, with obvious reluctance, went out with the girls. But when they came to North Street, Elizabeth insisted that she was quite safe the rest of the way. Annie seized her and gave her a warm kiss, and the two stood at the corner and watched her a little way. The moon was low now, and the houses cast great shadows on the quiet street.

Elizabeth was not at all afraid and called back to them after a little distance, so that they turned and

walked back to the party, arm in arm, in the silent summer night.

It was almost morning when Elizabeth, waking from troubled sleep, heard Annie stirring about in the front of the house. But she kept silent, fearing Aunt Jane's disapproval.

She rose at six o'clock, and while Annie slept, went down the hill into the valley where the railroad ran beside the river. Her face was pale but composed, unmarked by storm or excitement. The fresh air revived her as she walked. The day would be hot later, but now the air was golden and pure, and only a few trains clanked in the valley. The wind blew the plumes of delicate smoke across the river, on to the mines, so that all the north hill was clean and bright.

Business was already brisk at Stuart's restaurant. Men who had danced till late and slept on the station platform or in farm wagons, were eating, or had eaten and gone. Elizabeth saw Ole sitting on a stool at the counter near her place, as she slipped behind the money-drawer. Stuart was impatient to leave the desk and attend to the rush of business. Cowboys, their ponies tied to the rail along the rear of the place, were clamoring for food. It was impossible for Elizabeth to talk to Ole. She looked at him, and he gave her a reassuring nod and went on eating, slowly, patiently. Finally there came a little lull in her activites, and he took the soiled round cardboard slip he had received from the counter boy which showed that he had eaten prodigiously.

"Ole," she whispered, and her blue eyes pleaded with him to spare her questions.

"He's all right," he answered, as he deliberately

counted out his money from a buckled purse he took from his trousers pocket. "Got black eye—" he indicated the spot above his right brow. "He was drunk—ver' ver' drunk, 'Lizabet'. I took him hotel, wash his face and push him in bed. Brudder ver' mad. I chase him 'way and stay with Jim. He wake up this morning early, get up, and write this for you, and go back to bed again. He'll be all right. Don't you worry. Brudder will take him home."

He slipped an envelope, with a woodcut of the hotel building on one half of the front of it, into Elizabeth's hand. His small blue eyes held her steadily.

"You like dat feller, 'Lizabet'?"

"Change, please!" snapped a man behind Ole, and the big fellow moved awkwardly. Elizabeth took the check and made change mechanically. She laid the letter in the cash drawer among the flat bills. She was spared the necessity of answering Ole, for as the customer turned away with his money, her old friend turned back with a sorrowful shake of his head:

"You stay away from him and be a good girl. He break your heart for you. I come down again after harvest and see you."

The screen slammed behind him, and Elizabeth was plunged into the day's work. It was two hours before she was able to open her letter and spread it flat on the table to read. There was no greeting. The pointed slanting handwriting on the hotel stationery gave her the following instructions:

"Go at noon to-day to Westlock and Ooley's, on High Street, and say you are the girl Mr. Lake told them about.

Don't mention me. Be ready for our drive by ten Sunday morning and pack a basket of lunch.

"J."

She read it all again and again, but could find no personal message save the anticipation of the Sunday drive. There was no apology, no assurance, no regret. Yet strangely, the presence of the paper in her hand smoothed away all her difficulties. It was tangible evidence that he remembered—that he cared.

CHAPTER XVIII

Westlock and Ooley had a big brick building on High Street, down below the shops. It was a warehouse with a loading platform in the back, and an office, with big plate glass windows in front. It was a clearing house for eastern and Illinois manufacturers of the bigger kind of agricultural implements—the new binders and grain separators, mowing machines and wheat drills. But it carried, too, plumbers' supplies (then a rarity in Coal City) and every kind of hardware from grain fans to the tiniest screws and nuts.

Mr. Lake had not forgotten Jim's request. Elizabeth was greeted courteously by Mr. Samuel Ooley, a tall spare man, as dry as dust, with a brittle voice and light fanatical eyes. Her first impression of dislike was to wear away in months of daily contact, for she found him a real man, kind and just in his dealings with her, scrupulously honest in his business affairs, meticulous about the smallest obligation.

Mr. Westlock, a fat man with dark mustaches, whom Elizabeth suspected might be Jim's friend, was not in the offices much. His money was in the business, but he traveled east and west, buying and selling. It was Mr. Ooley who was to be Elizabeth's employer, and if he was surprised at the little blue-eyed girl sent him for an office assistant, his surprise was soon lost in her competence and industry. By the end of the first day the

two had settled down to comfortable mutual respect. Mr. Stuart had been kind about her leaving, glad that she should better her condition.

Mr. Ooley was the first prohibitionist Elizabeth had ever known aside from her uncle's instinctive dogmatic wish to restrain and suppress anything opposing itself to his New England conscience. That first long day in his office, he declared his position to her, and she was unconscious of the compliment that he should so soon sense her native intelligence, so soon desire to impress her with his convictions.

"The time will come," he declared with vehemence, "when it will be against the law, not only in this state, but everywhere in the world, to manufacture or to sell intoxicating liquors. A drunkard will be a sight never seen by man or child. Every one knows that although the state dry laws are enforced in many places, here in the north, especially in Coal City, there is no effort really to restrain liquor selling. I could go down the High Street and show you a dozen places with respectable front doors which are nothing but the saloons of other cities. Across in the mines the abuse is flagrant. But it is too early to hope for real success. That will only come when other states are dry, when the nation is dry and in Canada not a drop is manufactured or sold. Then, perhaps, we shall be free of this awful curse that preys on man. Can you believe this?"

They were wild words to Elizabeth. She knew very little about the matter, but she knew that many farmers and many townsmen drank regularly. She had seen men in the restaurant—she had seen Jim—thinking of him her face grew grave and sorrowful—and she answered:

"I should like to believe it. It would be wonderful—if it could happen."

"It will!" he prophesied, with intense satisfaction.

Elizabeth doubted that anything so unreasonable, so unpopular could ever be, but she was far too polite to voice these questionings. Mr. Ooley had by now entirely discarded the first impression of childishness, and put in its place a belief in her unusual ability and outlook. She was young, he thought, but clever and understanding. The salary Lake and Westlock had asked him to pay her did not seem too much, after all.

Saturday came. Elizabeth was busy, struggling with the new details of her work, keyed up in an effort for perfect tidiness, and, deep in her young heart, dreaming of the morrow. Ten o'clock, he had said, and she wondered how her aunt would take this excursion, the plans for which had not been divulged to her. Elizabeth had been very evasive about the new job. She had heard at the party, she said, that there was a job for a hardware wholesale house, and she was going to see if she could get it. Aunt Jane steadily grew more vague, less interested in the life about her, and Elizabeth felt, with disappointment, that the change in her work was scarcely noticed at home, until she began to talk of Mr. Ooley, whom Aunt Jane knew.

Working on the high stool at the big flat desk along the wall, Elizabeth looked out of the window and noticed a woman walking slowly along the opposite side of the street, her eyes on the warehouse. Elizabeth turned back to her work. Looking out again a little later she saw the same tall, fair creature, in a green silk suit, walking as before, eying the office. There was something

familiar in the movements—in the length of limb and the tilt of the head. Elizabeth saw her turn, and caught, for a moment, the clear bright profile—it was Mrs. Thorne.

Nervously, Elizabeth wondered what the other wanted. She remembered the scene at the party—she felt guilty, of what she did not know. If Mrs. Thorne wanted to see her, why did she not come to the office? Presently Mr. Ooley put on his hat and went out to the bank. When he was part way down the block, Mrs. Thorne turned and came directly across the street, into the outer door. Elizabeth waited, turned toward the door, her back to the desk, the light from the window falling full on her. Instinctively she braced herself, drew about her the invisible walls of her tower of courage, fortified her heart against assailment.

Mrs. Thorne came in quickly and shut the inside door behind her. She did not at once notice Elizabeth, but her bright glance flitted over the interior of the big office, in a searching look.

"Can I do anything for you, ma'am?" asked Elizabeth.

"This is Westlock and Ooley's, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I thought I would find Mr. Younger here. They told me, at the hotel——"

She paused, and her diffidence passed in surprise. She opened her eyes wide, her attention suddenly fixed on Elizabeth's small pale face, with its steadfast dark blue eyes.

"Mr. Younger is not here," said Elizabeth.

Mrs. Thorne came across the room, and there swept over Elizabeth a disconcerting realization of the other's

beauty and power. The long, slender limbs, reaching forward, to carry her so lightly, so delicately, the soft silk of her dress, falling back about her, the proud head, the clear demanding eyes,—she was an adventuress, perhaps, but not an ordinary one.

Elizabeth, however, was self-contained, and even when beauty stood before her, her eyes fixed in astonishment on the girl's face, Elizabeth did not move, but waited, silent and polite.

"Are you not Miss Whittaker, who was at the garden party with Mr. Younger?" Mrs. Thorne asked, in her quick staccato voice.

"Yes, Mrs. Thorne."

"What do you do here?"

"I keep the books, and write letters for Mr. Ooley, if you please."

"I didn't know you, at once," said Mrs. Thorne with a semblance of politeness, and she laughed in a bright affected way. But her voice became more unpleasant.

"I wanted to see Mr. Younger before he left town, but I did not realize that he was coming here to see you, or I would not have intruded upon you again."

"I didn't know Mr. Younger was coming here," Elizabeth told her. "But if they told you that at the hotel, he is probably on his way. Won't you sit down, and wait for him?"

Mrs. Thorne made no response to this invitation. Her whole thought was evidently fixed on Elizabeth.

"And so you are Jim's Little One," she murmured, almost as though she did not realize what she said. Then she tinkled again, and gave her head a small saucy wag as she looked at Elizabeth knowingly.

"It's quite wonderful to be young, isn't it? It's a powerful, if temporary, advantage. Jim, now, should know better, but he thinks you are quite an innocent. Of course, you could not possibly be as ingenuous as he believes. At least, I hope not." Her voice fell to a more confidential tone, and she spoke to Elizabeth in every guise of friendliness. "You are quite young, and I don't know whether you've any one to advise you—but if you are as susceptible as I was at seventeen! Don't set your heart on Jim Younger, my dear. It would be very unfortunate."

Elizabeth was not so simple that she could not read through such an obvious strategy.

"I don't believe you need to trouble yourself about me," she said, in the same polite voice, for she was determined not to be drawn into any conversation whatever.

"I suppose not," said Mrs. Thorne, and she did not seem to share Elizabeth's desire to be impersonal, for she went on, in an impulsive, heedless manner.

"No," she said, "come to think about it, I'm sure you are quite able to take care of yourself. I went over my own lists carefully the day after the party, and couldn't find your name anywhere. It does seem foolish, my troubling myself about a young girl who can find the courage to go to a party without an invitation."

Her playful manner had yielded to an air of disdain. She turned back the cuff of one of her small white gloves, then reached down and picked up her full skirts at one side, and turned to leave. Elizabeth had grown quite red, but she defended herself steadily. She regretted, indeed, that she had yielded to the temptation to go with Annie, and expose herself to any person's scorn, and she said so.

"I was at fault, and I am willing to apologize. Es-

pecially for going into the house. I can only excuse myself by saying that I have known Mr. Younger since I was a little girl, and I was confident that his invitation would be enough."

Mrs. Thorne had stopped to listen, her head a little on one side. She made a pretty graceful figure standing there, and Elizabeth could not but wonder how she could carry herself so beautifully, and still be so rude. After a moment's consideration the visitor shrugged her pretty shoulders and walked quickly toward the door, her body upright, her skirts foaming behind her. With her hand on the door-knob, she turned and looked back at Elizabeth, and her face had altered remarkably. Nothing could mar the perfect bony structure of her head and face, nor the clear and delicate skin, but the dark eyes were narrowed, the brows drawn straight, the mouth set and hard.

"Your apology is very graciously put," she said slowly. "I see you are not without training of some sort. But don't think I am deceived about you, nor about myself, either. There is no need for you to be meek and circumspect with me. I understand you fully, your subtlety, and your purpose. Jim Younger may think you a child in pigtails, but you are strong enough, and wise enough, where you care to be. You must know that I would never have come here, if I had known you were here. I feel that you have imposed upon me, and I had no desire whatever to see you again. But since we've met in this way, I may as well tell you that your infatuation for Mr. Younger was obvious to every one who saw you the other night, at my house. Also, I consider you responsible for the spectacle he made of himself, in the gardens. The credit is yours, as he has never before forgotten he was a gentleman."

Elizabeth felt a fierce hard pain at her heart. Although life had been full of difficulties for her, never before had she been compelled to listen to angry words, never before had she felt the rapier of hatred pierce her. She jumped to her feet, and her hand flew to her throat, as she stared at Loreen Thorne.

Her gesture, her expression, had a remarkable effect on Mrs. Thorne. She stared at Elizabeth, at the scarlet blush, the tears, the trembling tender mouth. And so real, so sincere, was the young girl's confusion, that Mrs. Thorne's own face was suffused with scarlet, and she came back a step into the room, and put out her hand in an imploring gesture, as though she would fain take back her hasty angry words. They confronted each other in silence, and there was intolerable pain in the heart of each.

Neither had heard the outer door open, had heard the step on the stairs, so that the sudden opening of the inner door and the entrance of Jim Younger was a complete surprise. Jim looked at Elizabeth, and then his stern gaze leaped to Mrs. Thorne, who stood where she had been, her pretty face suddenly emptied of all emotion, as she stared with astonishment into the eyes of Jim Younger—eyes black with anger.

"What is happening here?" he demanded in his quick harsh voice. "What are you doing here, Loreen?"

Elizabeth was frightened at his anger as she had not been frightened at Mrs. Thorne.

Jim, looking at her pale face and wide, dark-blue eyes, turned to the other woman, and his voice was peremptory.

"So this is what your jealousy will lead you to do?" he exclaimed. "I told you she was only a child. Go

away from here before you cost her her very employment—the bread and butter she has to earn while you spend some one else's money without counting."

He flung wide the door behind him, and as he did so, the outer door opened and closed.

Elizabeth instantly became self-possessed. She saw Mr. Ooley framed in the doorway, with another man behind him. Mrs. Thorne lifted her head in its small black hat with the bright wing on it, and smiled calmly at the two men, while Jim stood near the door in some confusion.

"Mrs. Thorne?" said Mr. Ooley, and he came on in, and lifted his hat and bowed to her with great courtesy. "It is very unusual to have a visit from such a charming lady in office hours. Pray be seated. It happens that I brought your husband in here from the street!" He made room for the man behind him, who came into the room. Elizabeth turned to look at Thorne, the great man whose name was familiar all through the state. He was tall and spare, but not brittle like Mr. Ooley. There were warmth and power in his swift glance, in the beak of a nose, in the mobile, scornful mouth. He was an upright middle-aged man of fine physique. His manner was always self-possessed, and now he showed no astonishment, no chagrin.

Mr. Ooley had turned to Jim, who stood in complete silence. Elizabeth, following his glance at her old friend, was struck anew with his manliness. There was a faint blue discoloration over his eye. His unruly hair had fallen forward, too, across his brow, but his vitality was greater than that of either of the older men, his courtesy quicker, his heart more kind.

"A rendezvous?" asked Mr. Thorne easily. "We have interrupted you?" His mocking politeness brought the quick red into Mrs. Thorne's face, and then, with sudden cruelty, she glanced sidewise at Elizabeth and answered:

"Eavesdroppers never hear good of themselves and, if you follow me, you must draw your own conclusions from what you see and hear."

Mr. Ooley's face had darkened, and he fixed his light eye on Jim vindictively.

"Come, Mr. Younger," he said quickly. "What are you doing here? Have you business with me? If not—it is nearing noon of a busy Saturday, and I shall ask you to excuse us."

Jim laughed shortly.

"Do you think you can dismiss me like a schoolboy?" he asked. His very feet seemed planted in the floor. "I came freely, and I'll go the same way." Mr. Thorne nodded his head. He turned to Ooley and spoke as though Jim were not there.

"He has plenty of courage. And then, he is young, which is enough for an infatuated woman." His cold ironic glance went to his wife, and again she flushed.

"Nevertheless, Loreen," he said, and his sarcasm, Elizabeth felt, was crueler than the lash of any whip, "it is inconsiderate of you to make this a meeting place for your lover. You can see how embarrassed poor Mr. Ooley is, and there is a young girl here. As for Mr. Younger, you ought to feel him careless, appointing such a meeting, exposing you so. He's not so clever as I thought. Refusing him the house does not bring out the ingenuity of a lover as I anticipated."

Jim was silent, immobile.

"I am afraid you will regret yourself, Mr. Thorne," said Mr. Ooley nervously. "And I must say I think your remarks are unbecoming. There's no reason why Mr. Younger shouldn't be here on business. Perhaps your wife has come to meet you?"

Mr. Thorne looked at his friend.

"You're a bachelor, aren't you, Mr. Ooley?" he asked, and got an indignant glance for a reply. Jim, now, took his own part, and his voice was as deliberate as Thorne's.

"You speak of my being forbidden your house. This is news to me. Since when and why?"

"Since the garden party, my dear Sir Innocence, and since the private quarrel between my wife and myself concerning you. She has doubtless given you all the news of it."

"Are you then in the habit of being so punctilious about your garden parties? A little drinking, done under your own roof, has become so objectionable to a man who has grown rich from—"

"Enough!" said Thorne sternly, and Mr. Ooley's eyes became bright with intelligence. "I'll have no innuendos, or blackmailing from you, young man. Loreen—while there is any decency left to save, let's make the pretense of saving it."

He walked past Jim and offered her his arm. She turned and smiled, her eyes half-closed, a gleam of warmth from their brown beauty.

"I'm sorry, Jim. Good-by, for now," she said gently, for her husband's benefit. Jim made a slight bow but did not answer. They were all silent, and then, as the outer door closed, Elizabeth went back to her stool, mounted it

and turned to her desk, the street within sight, her back to the two men.

"Well, Mr. Younger?" said Mr. Ooley sharply, after a moment.

"Let's leave it that Mrs. Thorne wishes to annoy her husband," said Jim gently, and Elizabeth realized with a queer mixture of respect for his chivalry, and of dismay at the evidence of Mrs. Thorne's hold on him, that it was Jim's intention to protect this unscrupulous woman all he could.

"It is as good an explanation of all this talk as anything. What Mrs. Thorne might wish in my office is not your concern, but it is obvious that so fine a lady came here for any purpose except that of seeing you. Whatever your part in all this mystery is, I'm sure it is discreditable, and it does not interest me. I will bid you good day, sir."

After a moment's silence, Elizabeth turned on her stool, to say good-by to Jim and saw him leave without so much as a glance at her. She looked out of the window and saw him walking down the High Street, but he did not look back, nor was there any lessening of the proud twist to his body, the indomitable courage of his high head.

"This has been an interruption for you, Miss Elizabeth," said Mr. Ooley gently. "And I'm sorry that you were present, for all this might have been more unpleasant. However, too much has been said to-day. If you will come over here and sit by my desk, I'll show you what I want you to do with these letters for the East."

CHAPTER XIX

Elizabeth woke in the night to hear it raining and wondered if her day were to be spoiled. But the dawn came bright, and she knew that the rain had only prepared the way for a perfect drive. For though the earth might be a little muddy, they would be spared the deep, stifling dust of the country road in mid-summer. She prepared herself for her trip, wondering what to say to Aunt Jane. It would be easy enough to give an excuse, but she could not bring herself to do it. She felt a certain independence in her actions, which arose, doubtless, from the fact that she was the bread-winner. Yet she hated to pain or alarm her aunt, and the news of the intended expedition would do both.

"Are you going to church, Elizabeth?"

"No, Aunt Jane. I'm going to be away all day. I'm sorry to leave you, since Annie is already gone to Waynesville, but you won't mind staying alone, will you?"

The old lady stood by the table, her eyes fixed on Elizabeth with sudden attention. Elizabeth sometimes felt a secret pang of anxiety and wondered what she could do if her aunt became actually helpless. Now, feeling those eyes on her, the old childish tenderness welled up in the girl's heart. How far she had come—how strange her life was that now she could no longer come to her aunt with all the bright news and gossip of

her movements, as she had done in the little girl days, when she brought the gold and gilt to distract her mind from her grief, to save her from sorrow.

Moved by a deep impulse, Elizabeth went and wound her arms about her aunt's neck and laid her cool face against the soft old cheek.

"Oh, Aunt Jane—so many things have happened to me that I haven't told you. Let me tell you everything—everything—that my new job came from Jim Younger, it was he that got it for me, that I met him that night at the party and danced with him, and he was so kind—so gentle and wonderful. But later, before we came home—"

She pressed her aunt down into the chair and, sitting on the little stool, told her all the long events of the past week, of the party and the conflict in the office the day before, and of her promise to go to the country with Jim that Sunday—how she had told him she wanted to see the wheat-fields again.

The old woman was silent, except for an occasional ejaculation of surprise or despair. She read much further into the account than Elizabeth was aware, and at the end, she shook her head sorrowfully.

"Elizabeth—can't you see, this woman is—don't you understand about life—are you still so innocent that you don't know what all these things mean?"

"Yes," said Elizabeth, "I know what it all might mean. I know that Mrs. Thorne is in love with Jim, but I don't believe that he's done anything wrong. Somehow—she hasn't the hold on him that she might have if—"

Here was wisdom indeed, and the older woman made no concealment of the fact that she was astonished

by it. Nevertheless, she took it upon herself, thus tardily, to instruct and advise her young charge about the vital facts of life itself, about marriage, about self-protection.

Elizabeth listened quietly, with a strange feeling in her heart that none of this was new—that somewhere, somehow, all of this knowledge had been hers, but neither named nor claimed before. An hour passed in the quiet warm kitchen. It was good, thought Elizabeth, to be all alone in the house again, as they had been alone at the farm. The fabric of their unity, which had been strained by Elizabeth's absence from home and Annie's presence in the house, was knit close again. When the conversation at last came falteringly to a halt, Elizabeth once more took up her plans for the day.

"You won't mind if I go?"

"I won't object," said Aunt Jane, and again there was a hint of sorrow. "Elizabeth, I couldn't bear it if you came to love him. Keep your heart your own for years yet. Married life is hard, and a woman must know—and be sure. Wait and see what Life brings you, and let this man and his mistresses go their own way. But go on, to-day. I know he thinks of you only as a child, and let yourself remain so in his eyes. I should like to see the farm, myself. Ole will be working. The neighbors out there say he pays no heed to the Sabbath. Come, I'll help you fix a lunch, so that Jim Younger will not think the Whittakers have forgotten their old gift of hospitality. But don't bring him out here in the kitchen. Take him away, as your own guest, and let me stay out of it."

They went to work together. Preserves and cured meat were found. Sandwiches and cake were packed with a clean white cloth in an old Indian basket. Aunt Jane

even contributed a bottle of unfermented choke-cherry wine. Elizabeth, at her aunt's advice—the old lady wished to emphasize the illusion of girlishness—took off her shirt-waist and skirt and put on a gingham dress that had been made for her to wear at home. It was blue with white trimmings, and it was short and cool and would be more comfortable for traveling.

At ten o'clock Elizabeth heard her name called. She went to the door and saw Jim sitting in a new buggy with bright yellow wheels. He lifted his hat, but could not leave the horse. She went back into the kitchen, kissed her aunt, got her hat and basket and came out.

Jim crooked the wheel for her, and Elizabeth climbed in beside him. He was smiling as happily as she had ever seen him as he tucked a fringed cotton lap-robe over her dress to keep the dust and dirt away. He had a fine horse in harness to the light rig, a shining young bay. Jim merely put out his hand to the whip and the horse was away, down to the High Street, then west and north and at last through the gap in the hills where the river flowed into the valley, through the dwindling swells, and before noon, on the prairies, under the prairie sky with the open fields of wheat on either side of the road, the farmhouses and barns like ships on a sea, rising against the sky-line, falling down behind them.

The road was good, with just a suggestion of new dust forming on the hard ground. The buggy wheels whirled and the horse went steadily forward, his good feet hitting the ground with a rhythm like that of one's own pulse, like the rhythm of morning and night, and spring and fall, the rhythm of the world, of the universe, of love and life itself.

They talked and were silent. He seemed, to-day, full

of something new, some happy serenity that made Elizabeth wonder.

She was at first self-conscious, shy, and a little unhappy from the talk with Aunt Jane, for nothing is more disturbing to the peace and frankness of a young girl than the painful necessity of instruction in the matters of sex. She sat by him in silence, but she had always been a quiet thing, he reflected, and in her small dignity there was a charm all its own.

But Elizabeth was healthy, and she was fond of him. As the miles swept behind them and the land unfolded its own strong maternal forces, she became more at ease. She forgot, in a measure, all that had been said to her, and she began to talk a little, and he to listen.

"See how the wind moves in the wheat. What is it—the change of color, Jim?"

"It's because the heads are bowed—the light strikes them differently. I figured it all out once. Pretty, isn't it? If we were coming the other way now, we'd see a different effect. But it's because that wheat is so good that it's beautiful, don't you think?"

"Do they always go together?" she asked him, and then laughed. "Look at Ole, how good he is, and how he works, but he is certainly not beautiful."

"I didn't mean like Ole. He is good in his way, but he is seeking for himself. He wants possession, power. Did you never think of that? He forgets himself for what he can lay hands on. But as for the wheat—we love it because it is our bread, and it has no purpose except to grow, to bloom and bear its golden seed. Then the binders come in and cut it down, and its beauty is even increased in the golden shocks. But it doesn't do a thing

for itself—even leave its own seed in the ground, and it is the loveliest thing in all nature."

"But there's the snow—you forgot about that."

"Yes, the snow. But I don't love the snow as I do the wheat. One time, I remember, I hated it. There was a little girl with boots sodden and stiff, and leather laces that she couldn't undo. And when her shoes came off, her little feet, just a baby's feet, mind you, were like small pieces of ice in my own warm hand. I hated the snow for that."

She laughed a little. He turned and the blue eyes under the heavy brows gleamed down at her.

"Do you remember you told me you'd seen women who loved winter here? I've got like that, Jim. I walked all last winter, back and forth, early morning and late dusk, and I saw the snow, all red with dawn in December, and blue with night the same evening. I remember I argued with Mr. Stuart once. He declared there weren't any such things as blue shadows, and I said, 'Not on the snow?' 'No, not on the snow. Shadows are black,' he said."

"He's crazy," exclaimed Jim. "Shadows can be any color. I saw a rosy one once. I was coming into Waynesville in a sleigh, and there was a red shadow on the snow. I stopped and looked and could not make it out, and then I saw that the sunlight shone in a window, just a little pane, and the glow was caught and held in the smooth frozen surface of the snow. There was a shadow, too, from a tree—I saw it, I tell you. But then, the snow's not white, you know."

She had observed this, then told him how she had learned to watch for the colors.

"Especially lavender—the green and blue in the snow is common, but just at certain hours, when the winter is late and it's almost time for the Chinook, the snow has places like little pools of lavender color——"

"Did you ever notice how the snow changes and everything is different before the Chinook comes? Nature knows—she grows ready. I've seen a hard black look upon the ground before the first hoar frost in the fall—a shrinking——'

"Oh, Jim!" cried Elizabeth. "How wonderful it is—here are my two eyes, and there are your two eyes, and we see the same thing. Everybody doesn't. Lots of people laugh, and you learn to say nothing. But I never dreamed there was anybody, anywhere, that saw the lavender snow and knew the ground drew into itself before the frost came."

He was sympathetic.

"You'll find, as you grow older, Elizabeth," he told her gravely, "what it means to find a friend who sees life through the same eyes with you. Even if it's only in one little way, it forms a contact from heart to heart. It's one of your rare and beautiful experiences, but you mustn't bank too much on it. Just because we both love nature—I'm not in the same class—not in the same world with you, child, and never forget it."

"I never knew you were so humble," she said mischievously. "I always thought you held your head as high as any one and never retreated a step."

"I don't—with my own kind, but I hope I know—I hope I've sense enough to realize that a little girl lives in an atmosphere long forgotten by a hardened man. But never mind all that. This is your day, and we'll not talk about me, at all."

They drove on in contented silence. Then, as the road turned and ran north, there was a slight change in the country. They had been climbing imperceptibly for miles, and now came out on a flat land where there were no farms. Along the west there was brush and, in the distance, trees.

"Look—" said Jim, and pointed his whip, so that the Morgan horse leaped a little on the road. Elizabeth, following his gaze, saw the shine and shimmer of water among the trees. The trunks were immersed in it, and the brush, too, stood half-plunged in a blue and sparkling beauty.

"Why, it's a lake!" she exclaimed. She had never seen such water—so clear, so limpid, so dancing in the sunlight. It was now high noon, and the sun stood straight above them in the sky. "A lake—with all those trees,—it must be new water, Jim—but on this high place?"

"Mirage," he said, and even as he spoke, Elizabeth saw that they were coming near a great tree that had been standing in the water, but that now stood dryly in the grass and brush. Yet farther along among the trees, the vision of the water persisted, bright, blue and moving.

The road twisted a little, and on the left there rose, a quarter of a mile away, an enormous straw-stack, the biggest Elizabeth had ever seen. There were some small buildings huddled by the road, beyond the straw, and here, there was water.

"But that's real—that's water, Jim, or my eyes will never get credit from me again."

He did not answer, and the horse plunged steadily

onward, his feet sending up the soft puff-puff of dust, wherever he struck them down. They neared the straw-stack, and it stood, a black and moldering ruin in the dry stubble and weeds of a field that had not been plowed that year. There was no sign of life about the little house, and certainly there was no water—no drop or trace of it, no shine, no sparkle of beauty. They began to drop slowly down into the flat prairie farms again, and the mirage was lost behind them in the wild and tangled place.

"Jim," said Elizabeth, "what is it?"

"Nobody knows," he told her with reverence. "I've seen it two or three times in my life—only once as beautiful as it was to-day. There are different explanations—the reflection on the earth of water at a distance, from the heavens. Nobody really knows. It's not a reasonable thing. But there's no doubt that, under the right circumstances, it's a visible thing, but—it's a mirage, that's all. I don't know. What do you think?" he asked her.

She shook her head.

"It just seems as if—" she paused to formulate her thoughts, which were not so much the active motion of intellect as the spontaneous knowledge of her heart. "It seems, if we can see water there, when there isn't any, nothing we look at is real, or else everything is real. Maybe there was water there once—a great lake drained away now, as the other land fell from it. And the picture stays there in the air, and we see it sometimes. Or maybe there's another world right here, mixed up with ours, and sometimes God lets us see it—a little group together so that we'll believe one another. But that's too difficult to understand—I just have a feeling about it—that it's real."

"Well, of course, there are a lot of worlds all mixed up together, and two men can stand arm in arm and see a different view, but that difference is individual. It's in the eye of the beholder, as the poet says, not the physical changes and aspects of the earth. Whatever it is, it's a fine fair sight."

"Yes," she agreed.

"I saw a mirage on the water once," he told her. "That was the only one I've seen to compare with what we saw to-day. Once or twice I've seen the faint suggestion and movement of water in the distance, but it didn't persist. This to-day persisted even after the road changed and the scene differed. But that time in Canada—three years ago—I was at Lake Dauphin with a couple of men and a guide, and we fished and swam. The water was sparkling, beautiful and clear, cold, too, for midsummer, and we took out great fish in water alive with them. In the afternoon I swam out to a rock standing in the bay and hung there resting, and I could see, out across the water, an island—a green, lovely thing, hanging against the sky, it seemed almost above the surface of the water. The other sky-line was far away—merely a dim gray streak—and there, half-way between, stood this small fair island—a place like heaven itself. I lowered myself into the water, to swim to it—I can't tell you how it drew me, held me, and then I heard the guide and my friends shouting, and I looked back and saw them waving their arms and pointing. One of the men swam out toward me. 'Can't you see the mirage?' he shouted, treading water. 'Can you see the island, where there isn't any?' 'I'm going out there,' I told him, but he persuaded me to come back.

I went to shore and dressed, and it was good I didn't swim farther, for the water was cold and deep. The island hung there until the sun sank over the woods and mountains behind us and threw a flat glare over the lake. Such a beautiful place! I wish you might have seen it. I wish I might see it again."

She was moved by his narrative, and again they shared a silence filled with wonder.

He looked at his watch after a little.

"We'll reach Ole's place a little after one. I'll push the horse on until then, and we can let him rest a couple of hours before we start back. Won't it seem strange to you, Elizabeth, to be home again?"

"Not strange, but fine," she answered, and it came to her how fine it would be, going back with him. She had a strong desire to talk, such a desire as she had never felt before in her life, and leaning her head back against the high cushion of the buggy seat, her hat in her lap, she told him about those years—all the little details of the old life—even told him that old exciting encounter between Annie and Ole, at which his eyes gleamed a little strangely, and he looked out across the familiar country.

"I felt terrible about it, Jim, something dreadful—and black—seemed all around me, and then I went down into the pasture for the old mare, and the sun was setting—" she put before him her tender experience that had ended in a child's amusement. He laughed his old laugh, his head flung back, his eyes drawn together with merriment. Elizabeth, looking at his red mouth and the shining white teeth, thought of the old nursery rhyme:

"Twenty-four white horses,
Upon a red hill,
Now they stamp,
Now they champ,
Now they stand still."

She was delighted to have made him laugh. Her latent humor came into play, and she began to tell him old funny things about Aunt Jane and Ole, things she had not known before were so amusing, about how she had dressed up with a stocking in her hair, and how Ole had come back to the farm, but wouldn't come in the house. He stared at her with wonder and delight, with astonishment and laughter and growing regard. Things that had been hard for her were now illumined with the giddy light of nonsense, and she gave them to him so, drily and easily, her little tongue wagging, wagging——

They came at last down the old familiar curve of road and stopped before the little house. Jim opened the gate and Elizabeth drove through. He shouted, and there was not even an echo to answer him. They went into the barnyard, and Elizabeth followed Jim into the empty stable and watched him as he unhitched and rubbed down his horse, watered him and brought him back to the cool dim stable.

"There's a mirage here, too," said Elizabeth, standing in the wide door, with the bright glare of outdoors on one side and the dim coolness of the barn on the other. There were white chickens about her feet, and she turned, in her short gingham dress, to smile at Jim.

"Can't you see her," she asked: "a little thing, barefoot, with swinging braids, and a blue calico apron? Can't you see her standing on a box to reach the horses

and rub them down—climbing the scantlings to slide down the neck of the biggest gelding to ride him off to pasture. Can't you see her—loading the stone boat and cleaning the stable and taking the horses, two and two, to water—a little thing——"

She was almost in tears.

"Oh, Jim," she said sadly, "it's so many years ago. She expected too much—that little one—magic, blue velvet dresses, diamond rings and princes on horseback. She thought, of course, it would all happen to her—and here she stands—a bookkeeper who can not even afford to wear her office clothes on a gala day like this."

He came beside her, took her hand in his own and made an imploring gesture.

"Don't grow up, Elizabeth," he begged her. "Don't grow up. It's not time for you to see that little one yet. You're still she, and you can't see her till you've left her. All the magic is still ahead of you—the blue velvet dress and the diamonds and all the princes out of all the fairy tales. You're still so little and young. Promise me you'll still look for the fairies in the bluebell's cup."

She understood him, and that very fact proved to her how useless his pleading was. It was true that one can not see the child one was until childhood is far behind. And she, at seventeen, had reached that place. But she laughed a little, made exquisitely happy by his thoughts, his presence.

"Come," she said, "I'm starved. There's a rock by the lake where I used to take my doll on Sunday afternoons."

They stared at each other, and exclaimed together: "We forgot the doll!"

But there was nothing to do about that now. Jim invaded Ole's kitchen for dishes of some sort, got a pail full of fresh water at the well and followed Elizabeth around the haystack to the flat rock. There they found the old round stones she had once rolled to make chairs for her table. Elizabeth spread the lunch and they ate it under the dancing quivering shade of the lake maples, ate and packed the rest away for supper on the way home. They drank the choke-cherry wine, and Jim lay on the ground and she sat, her back to the rock, her eyes dimmed and wearied by the dancing sunbeams on the water. The sun rolled slowly down the wall of the sky, and almost before they realized it was time to go home again. Elizabeth had not gone in the house, had not visited the old berry patch, had not looked at the wild-rose hedge, nor seen if the blue jays had taken the robin's-nest again as they had for so many years.

It was always a mystery to her, that two hours. She could never remember anything especially that was said, or any experience of heart or mind to belong to it. It had passed in a dream, in a trance of magic—a golden period—swept into oblivion in the twinkling of an eye. She could not remember that she moved—yet she knew she was never in her life further from sleep. She knew that his blue eyes rested on her, deep, content, with a growing light and color in them; that the twisted, quarrelsome Younger brows lay smooth on the arch of the eye; that his mouth was quiet, reposed, at peace. She knew only the sense of infinite satisfaction.

They arose from their resting place, brought out the horse and harnessed him, packed away the lunch, and got back into the buggy without altogether disturbing the

enchantment of that hour. Yet now the words that had flowed so fast and free were lost in their contact, like a bright stream that plunges suddenly below ground, whose murmur is lost while the current runs steadily on between the cool rocks of silence.

Elizabeth was glad, as she drove the horse through the gate, and Jim closed it, that Ole had been away—wherever he was. From the road she could see the dark figures of Ole's fine cattle moving on the slope of slough and pasture land; could see the glory of the wheat-field, ripe for the binders; the heat and haze of the summer afternoon, dancing over a world full of mystery and joy.

The horse was fresh, for they were leaving later than they had planned. They were traveling south and west now, and at times they seemed to be driving right into the sun. It struck on their cheeks and the heat was terrific. They had put their hats under the seat, and even the light laprobe, so necessary in a buggy, was a weight on Elizabeth's knees. But after a little they reached the place where they saw the mirage in the morning, and Jim drove more slowly. The sun was now below the tree-tops, and a little wind came stirring, blowing the dust away from the buggy as the wheels churned it up in the road. They stopped here and ate their supper and drank the last of the fresh wine, then went on again in the haze of dust, the sky a vast crimson panorama, every dust particle in the dry air adding to the iridescent beauty of the sunset.

The evening star came out in the blue sky, and hung, a shining young virgin, in the tender twilight. The sunset faded and the wind grew more brisk. The horse plucked his ears forward and his feet struck the road in a sharp staccato.

Jim began to talk, telling her tales from his boyhood, his adventures, his travels in Canada, his trip to the East—Lake Michigan, which he had seen from the Sand Dunes, and the wonder of Chicago. He told her about a play he had once seen, in an eastern city,—a play written for little children, and she grew drowsy and leaned against his shoulder more heavily, listening in a warm deep silence.

After a little he sensed her weariness. The long hours in the open air, the hypnotic influence of miles of driving, were working their way with her. He put his arm in its white shirt-sleeve about her shoulders and drew her head, with its coil of braids, down on his shoulder. She lay there, dreaming. Soon she was fast asleep, safe and at peace in the hollow of his arm under a sky of twinkling stars.

He could see the dim outline of her cheek, the black smudge of her eyelashes, the corner of her mouth—not actually, for it grew too dark for that, but by the clairvoyance of fading light, in that he had seen them an hour ago and had not lost their outline and color in the night.

Something swelled in the man's heart—swelled like a mighty flood that would burst all the dams of his being, swelled and receded and left him full of a strange, numbing pain.

"She's only a little girl," he whispered to himself, before he could find the courage to wake her, as they were coming into the High Street. "She's only a baby—only a child." And thinking of the women he knew, he shuddered a little and wished she might never have to grow up.

CHAPTER XX

Annie came back safely from her visit to Waynesville. Elizabeth told her nothing of the things that had happened, the encounter with Mrs. Thorne, or the day in the country with Jim. It was not that she distrusted Annie or had any wish for secrecy, it was simply that it was all too difficult to tell again, all too deep, too vital for casual talk or excited gossip.

Annie, however, did not miss Elizabeth's confidences, as she herself had so much to say. She told Elizabeth a great deal about Mr. Mock, who had driven to Waynesville and spent all one Sunday with her there. Mr. Mock, evidently, was a man of superior ability and character, a man destined for success, the glass of fashion and the mold of form. He was the epitome of Annie's desires, and she was already engrossed in infatuation.

The summer drifted into autumn, and Elizabeth did not see so much of Annie. The older girl did a great deal of sewing, keeping herself really stylish and making a tremendous effort at consistent tidiness. It had been her way, since Elizabeth had first known her, to let things drift and accumulate until they were beyond the borders of decency, and then, in a terrific whirlwind of industry, to clean everything to unnatural brightness.

She went out a great deal with Mr. Mock, and her Saturdays were spent almost entirely in his company.

There were long buggy rides and picnics, trips to other towns, and sometimes at night Mr. Mock would take Annie to the Opera House where theatrical performances were given, to the scandal of respectable people. Once, although Aunt Jane never knew it, Annie dressed herself in a suit borrowed from Mr. Mock, did her abundant hair in a man's tight hat and went with him to a prize-fight over at the mines. Elizabeth, slow to judge, felt that this was going pretty far, but she said nothing, loving Annie too well to be a censor.

"Elizabeth, he's just what I've always wanted," Annie confided, her eyes shining like stars. "He's just grand—that's what he is—grand! He's rich, too, and he's smart. Some day he'll be the State Superintendent of Schools, and he doesn't intend always to be an educator. He's got ambitions. He told me of them."

She paused, dreaming, and Elizabeth, following her gaze, could almost see Annie in gubernatorial mansions.

"He can do anything, and, Elizabeth, don't you breathe a word of what I tell you to a soul, but he—he's crazy about me, Elizabeth. Oh, he's so wonderful. I never dreamed that poor Annie Smail, with all her crazy notions, would ever have a grand wonderful man like him to love her."

It was true that Mr. Mock was lavish in his attentions, yet as autumn died into winter, and Elizabeth worked away steadily at the hardware office, there was a change in Annie, a petulance in her gay affectionate manner. Sometimes she was very quiet, consternation and a look of fear and apprehension came over her face. Then she would glance quickly about her, and her manner would become bright, hard, unapproachable.

Elizabeth wondered if she were disappointed, if Mr. Mock had not yet asked her the fatal, the wonderful question, but she could not ask, for there was something about Annie like the ground when the hoar frost was imminent—she was bleak, withdrawn.

And then Annie's gaiety increased into extravagance. Washing her hair in the kitchen one Sunday morning, she was full of loud jokes and laughter, and sometimes she was even a little cruel and mocking at Elizabeth's stupid days. But Elizabeth was not hurt. She knew that Annie was only unhappy, not unkind. She knew how it was—to wait, without fulfillment. Yet Annie never complained, but clung to her lover with feverish loyalty, allowing no one to murmur a word against him. None of the other stray young men came into the little parlor now, to be regaled by *After the Ball,* accompanied on the little zither. None of the other young teachers came to visit Annie any more, and she had less and less time for Elizabeth.

With the change to the new job, Elizabeth never saw Ole. He evidently did not have the temerity to come to the house. She missed him and also missed the old restaurant, where so many people came and went, and where folks smiled at her, and the men often stopped to joke and tease her. She had had friends there, she discovered, that she wasn't aware of, regular customers, who had always a quiet word for her, farmers who came in at intervals, and bedded their horses in a near-by stable.

It was dull, by comparison, in the offices of the wholesale hardware company, keeping books under the careful eyes of Mr. Ooley, learning from him, entering invoices, marking bills. He taught her, as the first of the

raw gray winter came down, to be an excellent clerk, and his dry, unchanging manner, with its dull politeness, filled her days.

The snow came. She had not heard a word from Jim Younger since that Sunday following the garden party. What a man! One met him and was flung at once into the midst of an intimate relationship, and then he disappeared for an indefinite period. It did not occur to Elizabeth to write and thank him for her beautiful day, to tell him how she was getting along with her new job, or to make any small skilful effort, such as Eve commonly employs, to draw to herself the attention and imagination of Adam.

Elizabeth now went home at noon on Annie's school days, for Auntie sitting all day at the window forgot the fires once or twice, and Elizabeth, whose heart ached at the sight of her increasing helplessness, could not bear to think of the shrunken figure in a house with a cold stove. One noon she encountered Hal Younger on the street. He stopped to speak to her and then walked part of the way up North Hill with her.

"How's your aunt?" he asked politely, with some other matter on his mind. Elizabeth's answer roused his interest and he showed his surprise, his face puckering strangely at the thought.

"Lord," he exclaimed, "is she that old—why, it makes me old, too. I can remember when she was thirty—she looked about twenty-two, as straight as an arrow. Elizabeth, did you know that she wrote to Jim last summer and asked him not to come to see you again?"

Elizabeth's heart stood still under his words, as under an icy touch.

"No," she said, "I didn't know it. She never told me."

"I've been encouraging Jim to come to see you—and finally he told me what your aunt had done, and said she was right about it. She must have written him a hard letter. He's not easily squelched."

Loyalty prevented Elizabeth making any reply to this. She was secretly dismayed at this sign of activity and interest on her aunt's part and at the tenacity of her antagonism to Jim. They walked a little way, and then he said, uncertainly:

"The fault is mine—an old one, that I had forgotten. It's a queer world, Elizabeth, when our own sins come back at us after a quarter of a century and hurt the ones we care for most. I'd give my arm for Jim. And I'd give the other one, if I might turn him over to you—don't know why I should feel it all so strongly, but I do. And 'way back,—everything's my fault. I've been thinking—I might alter things for you and Jim, if I went to your aunt, told her that he was different from the rest of us."

It was really a question, and he looked down sidewise at her small sturdy figure scarcely reaching his shoulder, her face partly hidden by her white woolen tam. He lunged along beside her, a big man, not so heavy as he had once been, his eyes dark in a dark face, with its black beard, once combed to a silken ornament, but now merely raked by fingers. He wore his big fur coat, unbuttoned in the cold wind, his hands in his trousers pockets, holding the coat back away from his chest.

"I saw you and Jim at the garden party at Thorne's last year. I knew he spent a day with you—he came

home with the light of battle in his eyes. Mrs. Thorne's been deviling him, but he won't go back there any more. He won't go anywhere. He just stays home and works."

Elizabeth could not help laughing a little.

"You're hard on Jim. First you worry because he doesn't stay home and work, and then you worry because he does. I guess you were right when you said he's not so easily discouraged. I guess Aunt Jane wouldn't keep him away—if he wanted to see me."

"Now," he chided her, "you've got your back up. Don't do it, Elizabeth."

She turned her blue gaze up to him, yielding at once to his request, smiling a little shakily.

"All right," she said, "I won't."

"Jim's unhappy," he told her.

"Well?"

"Don't you want me to go see your auntie—talk her around, perhaps?"

Elizabeth considered this in another little silence. It did not sound feasible to her, somehow. And then Hal Younger touched her arm.

"Look, Elizabeth—isn't that somebody for you? Aren't they signaling you?"

Elizabeth looked up and saw Annie at the gate, wildly waving her apron. She was out in the cold without a wrap, and Elizabeth could see a neighbor boy running off up the street, while his mother came hurrying to Annie. She broke into a run, and her feet carried her swiftly up the rest of the hill. It did not take long to tell her what had happened. Auntie had had a slight stroke and had fallen against the stove and burned her arm. The boy had been sent for the doctor.

They got her into bed. The doctor came and bandaged her arm, applied what restoratives he could, and left. She lay breathing hoarsely, gaspingly, only partly sensible. Elizabeth sent a message to Mr. Ooley saying she could not go back to work. She worked about the house, sat at her aunt's bedside, her practical young mind at once concerned with the importance of things. If Aunt Jane were this frail, she could not be left alone again. Some one would have to stay with her. But who? Not Annie, who had to teach school five days a week. Not herself, for they were dependent on her earnings. There might be some woman who would be glad to keep Aunt Jane company in return for food and shelter, for the circumstances of lonely women were desperate in those days. But this would necessitate Annie's leaving them, and they needed her board money. Doctor's bills were now in the air. Elizabeth had saved steadily from the larger salary, but even so, she was not prepared for sickness.

So her grief and dismay and the threat of death were buried in practical considerations as is so often the tragic case. Few women have time to weep, time for sackcloth and ashes, in the pressing need for food to be cooked, plans to be put in action.

It occurred to Elizabeth that Ole might know of some immigrant woman who would solve the problem, so she sat down and wrote him a letter which she sent to Mr. Stuart to give to some neighbor going out Ole's way.

Aunt Jane was better before bedtime, and on Sunday morning, although weak, seemed very much herself again. She could even sit up a little in the afternoon. Her eyes were constantly on Elizabeth, imploring her

not to leave the room. She smiled a little, drank the hot tea her niece brought her, and whispered her thanks. Elizabeth, working about, told Annie that she had written to Ole and discussed with her the matter of some one to stay with Aunt Jane. It would be necessary to have Annie's room, she said gently.

"I—what's the matter with my staying with her?" asked the school-teacher suddenly. A rich dark stain of red crept over her neck and face, and her lids closed over burning eyes. Elizabeth stared at her strangely.

"But your school?" she asked.

"Oh, well," said Annie, making a large gesture of indifference, "I'm going to get married in the spring. I was counting on quitting school after the midyear, and now will do just as well. I've a bit of money saved, and I want to make some pretty clothes for myself and take a rest. So if you want me to, I'll stay here with Aunt Jane and look after her, just for my board and room. I don't like that school with other teachers in it. Cats—that's what they are, and jealous ones at that."

Elizabeth felt queer. She was glad Annie was going to be married, but all of this seemed unreasonable. She had not expected any one like Annie to take care of her aunt. But poor people have to be satisfied with the arrangements they can make, and in a measure Elizabeth felt that it was a godsend to have Annie willing to stay. Some new unexpected plans might come in the spring. It would take every cent she could lay hands on, with three to feed and house and no room rent coming in.

"You'll have to be economical," she warned Annie. "I'll plan out the money and do what shopping I can

down-town, and we'll get our potatoes and winter meat from Ole. But I'll be glad if you'll stay, Annie. And I'm glad you're going to be married and be happy. It's what you've always wanted—a good marriage and now you'll have it, and there's nobody more proud and happy than I am."

She looked at Annie, sitting so straight in her chair, her hands plunged into her lap, her figure thinner, different than it had been. Now as Elizabeth kissed her, Annie's eyes were inscrutable, and she suffered the kiss and the congratulations in silence. Elizabeth's heart stirred painfully. She felt the presence of a vast gulf between them across which neither her sympathies nor her affections could reach. She felt, too, the warning stir of Annie's terrific unreasonable pride, and she was silent, letting the new arrangements pass into fulfillment with little fuss. But she began to feel a persistent apprehension about Annie, a dull sense of loss about her aunt, an isolation, which could not now be broken, from Jim.

CHAPTER XXI

Ole could not read Elizabeth's letter, a fact she had forgotten to consider. But he knew who had written the tidy sheets, and one evening when Elizabeth came home from work she found a team of great stamping mares and a shabby cutter before the house. It was like Ole, and a secret of his eventual success, that his house, his clothes, his equipment, were shabby and used long past their normal time, but his stock, his horses, cattle and hogs, were the best that could be found in that part of the state.

Ole was in the kitchen talking to Aunt Jane. He got up to meet Elizabeth and stood awkwardly, a great hulking figure in a sheepskin coat.

"You write Ole letter, 'Lizabet'."

"Yes, Ole," she answered. She put away her wraps and came to kiss her aunt, who was now promoted to a rocker in the kitchen, a warm comforter all about her. They sat down and Elizabeth told Ole about Aunt Jane's illness.

"So, I thought maybe you would know of somebody to stay with her, but now Annie is going to stay and we're all fixed until spring. But I'm glad to see you anyhow, Ole. I hope that you didn't drive all this way in the cold for nothing."

Ole made a gesture, deprecating the drive as of no

consequence. Aunt Jane spoke with unexpected stubbornness.

"I don't like Annie."

Elizabeth did not know what to say, fearing Annie might be in her room.

"It's only for a little while, until you grow stronger, Auntie."

"You come back by the farm with me—both two," said Ole.

Elizabeth got up and lighted the lamp. In the soft yellow glow she looked at Ole. He was unshaven. A coarse stubble of beard exaggerated the contour of his big hard cheeks—cheeks that had become like rock as the years passed. His eyes were red from the cold wind, and his clothes were ragged and slovenly. No checkered hunting shirt and scarlet silk handkerchief here, no winged collar and blue scarf, but an unwieldy dull brown strip of wool wound around the big neck and tucked away beneath the folds of a dirty coat.

She knew his kindness and devotion to her. She would have liked Aunt Jane to go to the farm again, but her instinct in this matter was too strong for her to oppose. She saw her aunt lean forward and turn a bright inquiring gaze upon her. It was humiliating to Elizabeth that this humble peasant suitor should be preferred now by her aunt to Jim Younger, not because he was Ole, or because he could give them back the old life on the farm, but because he was anybody—anybody but a Younger.

"I think we're better here in town, Ole," she said, steadily enough. She tried not to notice the way the old head leaned wearily back against the chair. "I've got

a pretty good job now if Annie can just stay for a little while. Aunt Jane's going to get well, you know, and we'll be all right, then."

"Annie's no good," said Ole shortly, and then, flushing a painful red, he looked at Elizabeth desperately.

"I tell you, 'Lizabet', I hear man's talk—barroom talk, about Annie and her man—her feller. I hear about prize-fights and other things. All the teachers quit the school if Annie don't quit." He was floundering in a sea of embarrassment, under the steady blue eyes turned on him. Elizabeth became defiant.

"You didn't always think so poorly of Annie yourself!" she cried at him, and he hung his heavy head. She went on, more gently, "We've made our plans, and you will have to let me manage things the best I can."

Ole sat in sullen silence a little while, then got up and went away, shaking his head, his face sad and troubled. Elizabeth sat by her aunt, her heart beating fast, thinking of what Ole had said. But she could not bring herself to consider such implied charges. Barroom talk! The red flushed up in her sensitive face at the thought of men standing and laughing among themselves. It wasn't right! There ought never be such places. Mr. Ooley knew how wicked they were, she told herself, forgetting that it would take more than the abolition of liquor to give respect for a careless woman. But she was carried along on a strong wave of sex loyalty. Let them talk, since they had nothing better to do. When Annie was married in the spring, they would talk differently. When Annie was the governor's wife, some day, all that would stop. As Annie had not come in, she got up and prepared the evening meal for the three of them.

The weeks now passed more rapidly. Elizabeth worked with unparalleled attention. She felt a strong necessity to maintain her place in Mr. Ooley's office in order to keep up the establishment at home. Any interruption in her earnings would spell disaster, so she believed.

They did well enough, but not as well as Elizabeth had hoped. Aunt Jane, to every one's surprise, grew gradually stronger and began to take up small duties about the house. She looked after Elizabeth's clothes, did small services for her niece with clinging devotion. Annie cooked and brought in the wood and coal, swept and scrubbed indifferently well, but was not at all thrifty. She abandoned the house and the work without compunction whenever her lover beckoned. Elizabeth realized that Annie was not a servant, was not being paid, and took on the extra tasks without resentment.

Every night Annie was away from home and still asleep in the morning when Elizabeth left. She seemed to have little to say, alternating between moods of feverish fun and downright bad temper. Aunt Jane made no effort to conceal her dislike for Annie, a dislike which grew more positive. So there came to be a state of silent unending warfare between them.

Elizabeth could appreciate Aunt Jane's feeling—the strong antagonism of New England upbringing and a lifetime of moral rectitude against all that Annie was visibly becoming. But she could also understand Annie's desperate plunge after happiness, and her gift of sympathy made her heart ache for both. She wondered, sometimes, if the way of life could possibly lie in Aunt Jane's harsh morality. She knew that it did not lie in Annie's hectic vacillation.

But these reflections were lost in the more immediate effort to find money for groceries and coal. Elizabeth wished, as she walked back and forth, that she had some one to whom she could turn, some one who would advise her. Annie had become remote and inaccessible, revenging herself on Aunt Jane by carelessness, not realizing it was Elizabeth on whom this blow fell. Aunt Jane was like a little child now, absorbed in her efforts to compel Annie to leave the house, vague and forgetful about money. Elizabeth longed, poignantly, for the comforting vital presence and magic protection of Jim. If only she might see him—talk to him! He would immediately pierce all these troubles with the sword of his potency. But it was impossible now for her to reach out a hand to him. She felt, in spite of Hal Younger's rebuke, that he had been too quick to abandon her.

At times the old loneliness of her childhood when first she came to the prairies, threatened to sweep down and engulf her. But she resisted this suggestion with all her strength of heart and mind. She was all right! Everything would work out, somehow, if she might only be steadfast. She would accomplish nothing by being doubtful, and sorry for herself! And with such stern self-discipline, and inward power, she still looked like a little girl. Perched high on Mr. Ooley's stool by the desk with the big ledgers, she seemed some child playing at business, unless one caught the azure intentness of her clear eyes.

One Saturday as she was putting away her pens and setting back the big ink-well, she yielded to an impulse that had been growing within her for some days to talk to Mr. Ooley. It was in his power to give her practical aid, and she must have it without delay.

He was sitting at his desk, in his swivel chair, a bar of metal which he had been examining in his hands. Now he was watching her, as he sometimes did of late. This grave regard did not trouble her, he seemed such worlds away. But to-day, as she turned to him, she found such a bright light in his eyes that she thought he was going to break out upon the subject of prohibition, the only matter that ever stirred him. She was disconcerted when he spoke before she could begin.

"How old are you, Elizabeth?"

"I am almost eighteen, sir."

"You are very young," he said slowly, his voice half wondering, half tender.

His question startled her and threw her into the shyness which overcame her so easily and from which she could hardly emerge to talk to him about what was troubling her.

"Don't you find me a good bookkeeper?" she asked at last, timidly, seeing his eyes still fixed upon her with the bright look in them.

"Yes, amazingly so. That is the astonishing thing. What makes you so steady? How can you, when your limbs are young—when you are still ardent with green sap—when you are not even fully grown—how can you sit still all day and add invoices for farming machinery?"

The disturbance in Elizabeth's breast increased. This talk of her age and her person was alarming. Never before had Mr. Ooley embarked on such a conversation. He had talked at her, but never to her or about her. Now she felt a tightness at her throat. Without any experience to warn her, she sensed the danger of the attention of his imagination on her youth and littleness.

"I only asked," she forced herself to speak—life was difficult at times—she would rather have just gone ahead, but there was a grocery bill to be paid that day. In some way she must increase her earnings, and whether she liked or not, she must at least try what she had resolved to try.

"I only asked," she said again, "because if I am a good bookkeeper, you won't mind what I wish to say. It isn't because you've not been generous, but I thought—perhaps you haven't taken into consideration certain things——"

"What are you trying to get at, Elizabeth? Don't be frightened. Tell me!"

He was leaning forward now, although he had not left his chair. She was glad to have him sit still. He was so tall when he stood. The light behind him struck on the sharp line of his chin and his thin shaven cheek. The hair that grew down before his ears was as dry and colorless as straw.

"If I were a man—if you had a man here keeping your books and being office clerk, and he had a mother, or a wife and child to support, wouldn't you pay him more?"

He leaned back now, considering her words. His eyelids dropped and hid from her the brightness of those light eyes.

"Haven't you enough money?" he asked, and then went on, "or are you a suffragette? Do you believe in equal rights for the sexes and that sort of nonsense?"

"I know nothing of such things, sir," she answered, honestly. "I haven't enough—I can hardly meet my bills."

"Your aunt was sick—that made it hard for you?"

He was trying to help her, but now panic had set in,—the age-old pitiful panic of the wage earner before his employer.

"Yes," she said, and it was hardly a whisper. He waited in sympathetic silence while she gathered up her courage. "I have two to feed now besides myself. Annie Smail lives with my aunt and me. She was boarding with us but left her school, so she stays on there as I can't leave my aunt at home alone. I don't have to pay her any wages, but I have to f-feed her. We used to have her board money and that helped. My aunt is very frail, sir."

His look had changed, and he regarded her with a queer alertness that made her think of Jim in some obscure way.

"So you would like more pay and feel that you earn it?"

"Yes, sir. That's just it."

("She can be very insistent," he thought.)

He swung his chair and looked out of the window down the High Street into the last of the sunlight.

"You should marry," he said at last. "You are too young and ignorant to try to maintain an establishment."

"I have no wish to marry," she said hastily. "We are quite comfortable. I just thought I would speak to you."

"Elizabeth," he said at last, and his tone was very gentle, "since you have spoken to me, since you have brought this trouble to me, I want you to let me speak to you frankly. I didn't know that Annie Smail lived at your house. I knew she had lost her place in the school.

I know a good deal about her one way and another. How long has she been with you? What is your connection with her?"

"She was my school-teacher when I was a child on the farm. We are old friends. After my uncle died and my aunt and I came into town, she came to live with us—a year ago."

"She is taking advantage of you and your innocence and inexperience. Don't you know, Elizabeth, that she is not a suitable person for you to have in your home?"

Elizabeth was silent, but her shyness was passing into stubbornness.

"If I give you an increase—pay you, in fact, what I would pay a married man, will you get some one else in the house? Will you ask Annie to go and not see her any more? I don't like to think of her there. It would be one reason for my considering your request favorably."

He spoke now so softly, almost coaxingly, that Elizabeth found herself surprised he could be so persuasive. But her mind went back definitely now to Jim. She saw him as he had left the Thorne ballroom with her, heard his low voice in the garden—there were certain rules of conduct one set for oneself. As the silence lengthened she knew this was one of the things she could never do.

"No," she said.

He was surprised, but there was a flash in the look he bent on her.

"Whatever you think of her," explained Elizabeth, "Annie is my friend. I asked you for more money, not because I wanted to let her go, but because my circumstances are such—I must have every cent I earn. I work

hard, Mr. Ooley, and I feel that you would pay a man more. I don't see what the one thing has to do with the other. Either you'll increase my pay, or you won't, but I must manage my own affairs at home. It would be just the same," she was quoting now but did not know it, "if it were any one else, but its being Annie makes it especially impossible for me to do what you ask. I couldn't."

"If every one is down on her," she was thinking wildly, "where would she go? What would she do?"

Again there was silence. But now Elizabeth was not afraid. She felt very brave and confident, upheld by some strong force within her. She would not even look at the possible consequences of her opposition to her employer. There were certain rules of conduct one set for oneself!

He got up and went to the office cash-box, took a few bills from it, and laid them in her hand.

"Here is twelve dollars. It ought to be enough. I'll pay you that, every week. It's big money for a young girl like you, but then, you are excellent help."

"Thank you, Mr. Ooley," said Elizabeth. She put on her hat and coat and with a soft good night went out. He stood in the window and watched her down the street,—watched the place where she had walked, long after she was gone.

CHAPTER XXII

When Elizabeth reached home, she found Auntie alone, trying to prepare supper. She moved slowly about the kitchen, her tall figure now stooped with weakness. But when she greeted Elizabeth, there was a beam in her eyes.

"She's gone," she said, with satisfaction.

Elizabeth felt defeated.

"You mean Annie?"

"Yes, I mean Annie. She's gone—for good."

There was no doubting the triumph Aunt Jane felt.

Elizabeth said nothing. She put on an apron and helped her aunt get the supper on the table. When they were eating, she asked:

"Why did Annie go?"

"I've been trying to make her go for a long time, but she wouldn't. I guess she didn't know where to go. But I had a caller to-day, and I faced Annie down with her. I told her."

"But what did you tell her, Auntie? Who came here?"

"I told her," the old woman went on, determined to tell this story in her own way. "I told her what Ole said about her, and how you'd stuck up for her. And I told her that she was keeping you from your young friends, by being in the house. I told her you'd lose your job if she didn't go."

Elizabeth's heart skipped a beat. She stared in amazement at this Aunt Jane, whom she had considered so helpless, but who was now so pleased with what she had done. She had no idea how near her threats had been to the truth.

"I'm not so old and feeble as you think, Elizabeth. I know Annie Smail. I know that kind. I know the sort of person Jim Younger is. I told you, years ago, that Annie was not a good girl. I don't believe she ever was any good. I wouldn't have her here—using our house for a shelter, carrying on with a married man."

"But Mr. Mock isn't married. Where's his wife?"

"She was here to-day. I know that."

"Mr. Mock's wife? How long has he been married?"

"I don't know—a year or two. The woman was out of her mind to marry him. She must be nearly fifty. He married her for her money, and she knows it. Now he's been running after Annie. He sent his wife East on a visit last fall, but she's home again now, and heard about Annie. She found out where Annie lived at last and came here to-day. I don't say that Annie knew he was married. He's kept quiet about it, all right. Everybody in town evidently knew but you and me and Annie. But she knows now."

"Aunt Jane, I don't believe Annie knew that. Maybe it isn't true. It must have been hard for her. Maybe it was his mother?"

"No, it wasn't his mother." Aunt Jane laughed at this idea. "It was his wife. She said so, and it was the truth. She says Annie's broken up her home, and she wants to win her husband back again. She'll have to

turn the calendar backward to do that. But she told Annie she was going to make a lot of trouble for her, and for you, too. That was what made Annie give in. She'd been storming around here, crying and carrying on, but when we started to talk about you, she packed up and left as meek as a Christian. She said when she left that the woman wasn't Mr. Mock's wife. Well, let me tell you, Elizabeth, neither is Annie."

Elizabeth was choked with tears, sickened with dismay. She saw Annie between the two fierce old women, tearing her to pieces. And Annie had given in to them, left the house because they had threatened Elizabeth. How cruel they were and how wise—to find this weak spot. Elizabeth, who had never cried for herself, laid her arms on the table, buried her face in them and wept for her friend.

This turn of affairs disconcerted Aunt Jane. She sat in the lamplight and looked at Elizabeth, the untasted dinner on the table before them. She reached out timidly, after a moment, and touched the girl's soft hair. She looked about her, as though for some explanation. Elizabeth cried stormily, now finding relief for many things and an exuberance of sorrow in all that had befallen.

"Don't cry, baby," pleaded Aunt Jane, leaning over her. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you cared for Annie so. I tried to do what was best. You don't understand about life. I've tried to tell you."

But Elizabeth could not stem the tide of tears.

"Where is Annie?" she asked as last, wiping her face.

"I don't know," said Aunt Jane honestly. "If I knew, I'd tell you. I don't think she knew where she was going. She's got relatives. You needn't worry about her."

Elizabeth got up and went to the wash-stand. She turned back her cuffs, washed her face and hands and dried her burning cheeks on the towel hanging there. She came back wearily and began to stack up the dishes. Aunt Jane was looking at her pleadingly, and now, when she spoke, there was some trace of her old sternness, her old impeccable dignity.

"Elizabeth, you must yield to me about this. I know that I am dependent on you here, that you feel you should be allowed to do as you like. But I have lived a great many years and seen more than you know. You are in my care. You are young and affectionate, and I am responsible, while I live, for your well-being. And if I see you have set your affections where they will bring you only disaster, then it is my place to check you in any way that comes to my hand. Your own friends, the ones you care for, understand all this. Both Annie Smail and Jim Younger know that I am right, or why do they yield to me? You think I am hard and lacking in human sympathy. It may be true. I have no sympathy with evil or evil doers. There is one path. Let us walk in it. You have not seen or heard from Jim Younger for months, have you?"

"No, Aunt Jane."

"Well, you see I was right in sending him away. He knew it. And you'll not see Annie again. You think I am old and helpless and that you are young and strong. But Elizabeth, I love you so much that I would be willing for you to hate me if I could prevent certain disasters for you. As long as there is breath in me, I'll protect your reputation from the wolves that stalk the by-paths of life."

She could speak no more. Her cheeks were red, her breath quick. The day had been too arduous and exciting for her. At these signs of the old weakness and trouble, Elizabeth was repentant and ran to her aunt and kissed her.

"It's all right, Auntie," she said, quickly. "It's all right. I'm satisfied with whatever you do. I know I'm not very wise. It just hurts me—— but what's the matter with me, when I love people you can't love at all? But never mind, darling, we won't talk about it any more. We shall get somebody that you do want to have in the house, and I shall do just as you want me to."

But she could not easily throw off the burden of anxiety about Annie. She made a number of half-hearted efforts to find her old friend and Teacher, but could learn nothing about her.

And Jim! Auntie did not think Jim was good enough for her! Jim, who could see islands shining in empty water, who was so gentle, so wise and kind. Jim, who had cared for her so gently, on whose shoulder she had slept that warm summer night, who had first sensed her loneliness, first given her an outlet toward all the others. When Jim was not good enough for her, she thought passionately, the very stars would fall. She had seen that deep current of humility under his showy arrogance. He might easily be made to feel himself unfit for her—a young girl, whose natural guardian disapproved of him.

But the helpless old aunt, growing almost senile now, was Elizabeth's first care, her immediate charge and responsibility. There was nothing whatever that Elizabeth could do, except move forward with the task in her hands.

They found a frowzy sewing woman, a Mrs. Kent, who came to take the front bedroom. She wanted to use the little parlor for a fitting-room, and as Aunt Jane was now strong enough to do part of the work, Mrs. Kent agreed to cook for herself, keeping an eye on the old lady in return for room and heat.

The arrangement with Mrs. Kent was really a better one, financially, and there was no question but that Aunt Jane was more satisfied. They settled into the new order of things, and Aunt Jane was pleased. She sat nearly all day in the little parlor, watching Mrs. Kent sew, staring at the women who came to try on dresses, listening to the endless fall of gossip to be heard in such a place. Sometimes Mrs. Kent did not want her about and sent her from the room like a child.

"Don't forget your fires, Mrs. Whittaker," and Aunt Jane would rise and go to tend to them.

It made Elizabeth sad. The strong wings of her young spirit beat hopelessly against the decadence of old age.

"Don't you remember, Aunt Jane," she would plead, trying to bring back the old spirit, "don't you remember the time the men came and cut the grain for us? Darling, remember how we cooked that day, and how it was almost dark when they left, and the wheat was all in shocks?"

Aunt Jane smiled and patted the little hand held in her own.

"It was because they thought so much of your uncle," she would nod complacently. "He was a good man, Elizabeth. He never deserted the straight and narrow way. He had a hatred for wrongness. All the Whittakers

are so. You must learn to harden yourself more against the men and women who do evil in this world."

Everything came back to this obsession of morality. Elizabeth, her whole heart passionately longing for the other's return to health and sanity, found only such responses, but her devotion increased as her aunt failed, until all her energy was centered on her. And in her efforts to help her aunt she brought back the farm to her own remembrance so that she could see its acres swimming in the long-forgotten sunsets of the old days.

She missed Annie intensely. Confined by her work and the care of her aunt, she had no time or opportunity to make new friends. All her days seemed spent in the company of her elders. There was not even time for dreaming. But there lay constantly a thought in her mind, a thought that colored all her other life, as a mountain steadily dominates the whole landscape about it even while those who work and live in its shadow have not time to stand and stare at its lofty slopes.

It was the thought, the mental image of Jim Younger. Sometimes she stooped to pick up the doll bought in Coal City, but made in Paris itself. A doll that had been dressed in pink muslin with pins thrust into its body. Sometimes an order from Jim's store came into the office, bringing with it proof that he was alive and moving. These simple orders thrilled and comforted her.

Spring came, and Aunt Jane miraculously began to show signs of recovery. Elizabeth left off her warm wraps and found that it was necessary to spend some money on clothes for herself. She had saved a little every week since Annie left. She was really too shabby for an office where she was so well paid. With warmer

weather, expenses at home were reduced materially. She talked the matter over with Aunt Jane and Mrs. Kent and decided to buy a suit—a thing long craved in secret—a skirt and jacket to match, a new sailor hat and a pair of the new low shoes.

She began to be conscious of some stirring in her heart. Something nice was going to happen at last. Something was waking, moving toward her.

CHAPTER XXIII

"She must get a sweetheart," Aunt Jane confided to Mrs. Kent, and the other nodded with understanding. This business of the new clothes was expensive, but the two women agreed that it was worth while. Mrs. Kent charged Elizabeth very little for her work, and fitted her carefully and well. There was enough money to provide a blue linen blouse for the office. It was decided that she would wear the new suit every day, all spring, keeping the blue silk waist, with its jabot of cream lace, for Sundays.

One day when she was fitting Elizabeth, Mrs. Kent saw the doll and picked it up with an exclamation of surprise.

"I dressed this doll for Jim Younger, years ago. Where did you get it?"

"He gave it to me," said Elizabeth, a warm flush on her face.

"To you!" exclaimed Mrs. Kent, in astonishment. "I thought it was some notionate gift for one of his fancy ladies. He was always giving things to women. And this! He was as particular about it as though it had been for a queen."

"It was only for me," said Elizabeth. "He and his brother stopped at the farm when Uncle was living, and afterward, he sent me this doll for a Christmas gift."

Mrs. Kent put the doll back on the stool. Elizabeth remembered with a pain at her heart how close she and Aunt Jane had been that night—her aunt had declared that no one should take the doll from her. And now, how different she was! The lie that had been promised that day had never been told, but Elizabeth realized for the first time how much it meant for Auntie to be determined to deceive Uncle if necessary to protect the doll for the child.

If the two old ladies had some unspoken design, in sending Elizabeth to work in her new suit and bright new hat, she never knew it. She had her own intimate personal dreams and longings. She was still set upon one image, one hope, still believing that by some twist of fate it should be hers. The man the older women were looking at with hope and expectancy, did not enter her thoughts at all.

So she worked at the high desk, by the open window, the blue of her new suit bringing out a deeper color in her eyes, the untouched rose and damask of her cheeks, the soft brown of her hair. She had passed her eighteenth birthday. She was growing beautiful in the midst of all hardships.

And Mr. Ooley, poor man, sat and stared.

He brought her presents. A black belt of grosgrain silk, with a buckle of cut steel.

"For your new suit."

"I feel so rich," she told him, the belt in her hands. "Since my parents died, when I was nine, it seems I've always been poor. Those two years in the orphan asylum, and then the struggle on the farm after Uncle died, and the years I've worked in town. But lately"—

she laid her hand on her heart and her eyes glowed upon him—"I feel something rich and wonderful coming—like a horse riding over a hill. Is it just being eighteen, do you suppose?"

"Partly," he told her gently. "It's the first process of growing up. Really, young ladies ought to have nothing to do but amuse themselves. They ought to have lovers and friends and gay times."

"I didn't know you felt like that about anybody," Elizabeth told him honestly. "I always thought you were severe, and believed that every one should work hard and be good."

"I do feel that way, but I guess I've never known a young woman so well before, Elizabeth. Often, when I look at you, it seems against nature to see you bending over a ledger. I feel I should like to set you free, like a bird from a cage, to try your wings among the flowers and in the blue sky."

This was quite a flight of fancy, and Elizabeth received it in impressive silence. With a sudden burst of imagination she saw herself as he was seeing her, a small blue bird with a throat swelling for song.

"But you see," she reminded him, "there is nobody that can do such a thing for me. I must work and take care of Aunt Jane. I have no other relation."

"A husband," he said, "could do many things for you."

Elizabeth was not too innocent to catch the drift of such talk. "But I have no husband, and I don't believe I want one."

A few days afterward he brought her a pair of little satin slippers with high heels and rhinestone buckles.

"I think you ought to have pretty shoes for those little feet." He offered them to her, embarrassed. "I got these from a friend who makes shoes. He made them for a lady, and they were too small, so I got them from him for you. They didn't cost a cent," he lied, seeing her hesitation, "so don't mind taking them."

Elizabeth was doubtful, but as Aunt Jane thought it was all right, she kept the pretty slippers. They made her feel like a little princess, they were so light and soft.

"He is the kindest, gentlest man I ever knew," she told the two women who were watching her with bright curious eyes. "He is really good, and he wouldn't do a wrong thing to anybody."

"No," they chorused, and looked at each other.

Elizabeth did not believe that Mr. Ooley could by any possibility be the knight whose splendor was dawning on her hill, but it was true that his kindness was growing slowly in her consciousness. All day through the long spring the two were in the small office together, and often alone for hours. Elizabeth felt a drawing, an impulse as of some magnetism, toward this older man. His dryness seemed to have left him forever. There was a flush on his face at times, and often in the cold eyes there came a softer light, making him almost young and handsome again.

He sat and lectured her at length on the one great cause, prohibition. Elizabeth, listening, trying to follow him as he argued down the popular view-point of personal liberty, then so much agitated in that particular section, thought only of Jim at Thorne's party. Supposing he could never get anything to drink? Then he would always be sober, gentle and kind, as she knew he could

be. How happy he would be—what heights he could reach! And Mr. Ooley, parading the bright wares of his mind, as a cock struts and spreads his gleaming wings, brought into her thoughts only the determined image of another.

Yet she was moved by him, too, moved to a tremendous admiration for his eloquence and goodness. The spectacle of a grown man setting himself to restrain the vices of others, did not strike her as obnoxious, as it did many. She saw only a great magnanimity. Any person, man or woman, who put his confidence in this man might hope for great peace and happiness.

One day late in May, when all the sights and smells of heaven and earth made Elizabeth think of a seed-bed ready for the drill, Mr. Ooley came to work in a new suit, a bright black and white checked affair, with black silk binding at the lapels. His collar was cut sharply so that little wings stood out on each side of his Adam's apple. It was a queer collar, defeating the purpose for which vain men first wore high collars. He had on a black-silk tie with small white flowers embroidered on it.

Elizabeth noticed all this finery with faint misgivings. For Mr. Ooley's increasing kindness threatened, she felt, her employment. She did not reason it all out, nor was she fully aware of the serious nature of his intentions toward her, but she knew, striking with her natural directness at fundamental facts, that if things reached some climax, she would not be able to work for Mr. Ooley any longer.

"How do you like it?" he asked, displaying his finery.

"It's nice. It makes you look young."

He came and leaned on the corner of her desk. He put out his freckled hand, and touched her pens and pen-wiper, the covered ink-well, the rule. He lingered but said nothing, and Elizabeth was far too polite to begin working. Unexpectedly he came and laid his arm across her shoulders, drew her head toward him, put his long hand on her soft round cheek and pressed her to him.

"I love you, little Elizabeth," he told her, and she could hardly believe the warm rough voice was his, it was usually so dry and thin.

Her heart beat thickly, heavily. Her limbs trembled, and she was overcome with confusion. All that was shy and virginal within her leaped against his confining hand and arm. Yet she found to her amazement that she was not angry. She could not be unkind to him. She was dominated by a desire not to hurt him.

"Do you think you could care for me a little, just enough to begin on? Sweet child! Sweet bluebell!" His thin face drew down to her. She felt the prickle of those ridiculous burnsides on her face. Then his lips touched her cheek and rested there.

Elizabeth was galvanized into action. Her fear of hurting him was lost in the necessity of getting away. She pulled away from his arms and tried to get down from the stool. He caught her, lifted her bodily in his arms, with a vigor that she remembered later with amazement.

"Let me down—please," she cried, but he held her high on his breast, her head back on the curve of his arm, her hands against him, trying to push herself free. He made an effort to kiss her, but she cried out at him,

and after a moment of frustration, he gently set her on the floor and turned away. She leaned against the desk, her heart knocking against her ribs, her whole being crying out with suffering from his effort at dominance, but she made no sound at all. He returned to his chair, and stood looking out of the window, his chagrin hidden from her. After a moment, he spoke uncertainly:

"Just think about it, Elizabeth. I'm old, in a way, for you, but I care so much! You aren't like other girls, giddy and wild. I'll be kind to you. I'll give you all that I have in the things of the world and more besides—my heart and my devotion." He turned back again, caught up her hand and kissed it with a courtly gesture.

Some one was coming in the outside entrance, and Elizabeth turned back to her work mechanically. She had no idea, however, what was before her. The pen shook in her fingers, and she had an almost uncontrollable desire to take her handkerchief and scrub away the burning mark of his lips on her cheek.

She began to open the mail, slitting each envelope, laying flat the enclosure with the checks attached, noticing the contents. The automatic effort calmed her a little, and while Mr. Ooley talked business with different customers throughout the morning, Elizabeth brought some order out of all the excitement.

Gradually dismay gave way to a faint happiness. She was such a humble little thing, it seemed to her most wonderful that this man, this smart rich honorable man, should love her. She was also astonished to see how his emotion had changed him, had broken forever the dry crust of his being and showed her a warm sensitive man

beneath. Her physical repulsion faded, her pleased surprise increased. Perhaps, if she asked him, he would not kiss her.

The air of the office was full of something almost tangible. Visitors felt it and there was much laughter and talk. Mr. Ooley was gracious, wooing her by his charming manner to every one else. He gave away favors and extended credits recklessly. At times he came to Elizabeth's desk to ask for a file or consult the ledger with a magic about him that began to sway the young girl against all her instincts.

Noon passed, and the afternoon came upon them with the air still alive with his avowal. Elizabeth had eaten almost nothing at noon and had scarcely heard what Aunt Jane said to her. She began to hope that she would be able to give Mr. Ooley the answer he wanted.

CHAPTER XXIV

THERE was a saw salesman in the office when she returned. A big red faced old man with white hair and twinkling blue eyes behind his steel-rimmed spectacles. He laid a dozen new steel saws on the big table. They were beautiful saws, looking as though made of precious metal, the handles turned and polished for the workman's palms, their bright surfaces gleaming in the afternoon sunlight as it came through the windows on High Street. Elizabeth, watching, felt a stirring of interest.

The man was trying to persuade Mr. Ooley to stock up exclusively with his company's saws, to push them to the merchants in the little towns about, to urge their use. They were more expensive than the saws the wholesale-house carried and would leave a slightly smaller margin of profit, but the salesman, Bond, put it to Mr. Ooley that every saw would make a friend forever for the wholesale-house and for the merchant who sold it.

He was an illiterate man, ardent, convincing. When he had gone thoroughly into the matter he sat down on a little camp stool from his own box and took up one of the lighter saws.

"I'll show you the kind of metal there is in these saws—" he said, and produced a short bow, strung with gut, like a violin bow. With a piece of chamois in his left hand, he gripped the end of the steel saw, tucked the

wooden handle between his knees and, with the bow against the straight edge of the saw held toward him, began to play.

Elizabeth stopped work altogether and turned on her stool, her heels tucked under her on the high rung, her hands in her lap, her girl's eyes very round and blue. He looked at her and looked again, and he played on the saw—old-fashioned swinging tunes—*Suwanee River, Oh Susanna, Rock of Ages,* and plaintive negro ballads, his bow speaking against the steel blade, his hand in the chamois shield, bending the steel to raise or lower the tone by increasing the frequency of the vibrations, as a fiddler puts his fingers on the strings.

An hour passed in enchantment. The salesman, stirred by something dramatic in the air, gave them a wonderful performance. He played on one of the big saws with a small mallet covered with chamois. The notes rang out softly, each unexpected pure tone a thrill. Elizabeth had heard so little music that she vibrated as the steel saws vibrated. Her heart rose and fell with the singing notes.

Finally Mr. Ooley got up and came and stood beside her. He did not touch her, but Elizabeth, looking up, saw the soft blaze of his eyes—the eager, searching, longing look. She smiled at him. No word was passed, but she felt caught up in his desires, complicated in his compelling wants. It was as if she had given a promise.

It was four o'clock when the man, Bond, left, and he took with him a gratifying order for his afternoon's entertainment.

The office grew quiet. Flies buzzed against the window. The table on which the steel saws had laid was

empty now. Elizabeth, feeling she had done little work, set herself soberly to get something finished before closing time. Mr. Ooley sat at his own desk, writing business letters with pen and ink, scratch, scratch, on the smooth bond.

There was somebody in the outer hall again. Mr. Ooley, looking up, spoke to the newcomer, and Elizabeth heard a chill note in the voice that had been so warm all day.

"How do you do, Mr. Younger?"

Elizabeth glanced up and saw Jim Younger in the door. He came in, quietly, glanced at her and turned away without speaking and sat down in the office-chair by Mr. Ooley's roll-top desk.

The men began to talk perfunctorily and then, with more interest, of business. They talked for half an hour or more before Jim disclosed the purpose of his visit.

He wanted an order amounting to several thousand dollars, and he wanted it on credit.

Mr. Ooley frowned and shook his head.

"You don't deserve it, Younger. You should have had the cash in hand. We gave you credit for half your goods last time—but a whole order!"

"Yet I understand you've been giving it to other merchants. Why not me? Why discriminate?"

"The reason is substantial. I have cause to doubt your business stability."

"You mean you are exercising your private prejudice against me. Am I not right?"

"Partly, perhaps—" the voice was growing colder and colder, so that Elizabeth felt a slight chill about her heart. How hard he could be when he felt it was necessary.

But he had never been so to her—he never would be! "Yes," the cold voice was going on, "that is, in effect, my position—to use my judgment, from whatever source it springs, to protect this business and the men who have put their money into it."

"Yet my record with this firm is sound—" Elizabeth understood that Jim was putting aside his antagonism in his fight for this credit. "You will find that I've paid every cent I ever owed here. Under such circumstances I don't see that you are justified in refusing me ninety days on a bill of this amount. I am short of cash and can not raise the money without considerable sacrifice."

"Yes, and good reason—you've been gambling in wheat—you and your brother. Drinking and gambling—" the voice was thick now. Elizabeth, looking sidewise a little, saw that Mr. Ooley's hand was shaking with a fury incomprehensible to her. He hated Jim Younger for some reason which must justify the violence of his feeling.

"I hardly think," the other said decidedly, "that my personal habits need concern you. I ask for credit. May I have it or not? I can't get the particular goods I want elsewhere. I don't want to sell the Taggart binder the Holts are offering. It isn't a good machine. Will you do me the courtesy of asking for my bills and checking my history in this office?"

There was some compelling honesty in this. Mr. Ooley, more calm, asked Elizabeth for the file that showed Younger's invoices and payments. Elizabeth got it from the file-box and brought it to him. She stood beside the two men and, standing so, saw that Younger took a fold of her skirt between his fingers. He gave it a slight tug.

She went back to her desk consumed with a mischievous desire to laugh. What a boy! He did not want to speak to her because he feared his friendship might harm her standing with Ooley, who hated him. So he tugged at her skirt like a child, to let her know he was glad to see her. She smiled broadly as she bent over her books, all the high emotion and tensity of the day gone in a bubble of young laughter.

The thing was finally left that Younger was to come back on Saturday and Mr. Ooley would then give him his decision. For some stubborn reason of his own, Jim Younger wanted his order O. K.'d that day, but Ooley would not yield.

"If you insist on an answer to-day, I'll give it to you," he said frankly, harshly, and Younger had to be satisfied to take the postponement.

"I had hoped to get back to Waynesville to-day," he explained in a mild tone that Elizabeth knew covered a feeling not at all mild.

"You will doubtless find plenty of occupation in Coal City," said the other, with almost a sneer. But he, too, recovered his good manners and they parted with polite formality. Elizabeth felt all her sympathies with her old friend, Jim. This was too ridiculous, refusing a good business man an extension of credit because the manager was a prohibitionist, the customer a man who drank! There was again the silence of work and at last Elizabeth, finding herself strangely weary, put her pens away, closed her books and got down from the high stool to wash her hands in the little basin and take her sailor hat from the wall.

Mr. Ooley took her hand in his. "Good night, darling,"

he said gently. "Rest well and come to me again to-morrow. You will do all that I want you to, Elizabeth?"

The girl found herself inaccessible, remote from him. She grew dizzy with a realization of power. She could say or do what she liked, hold him off, draw him on, exalt or depress him. He was hers, and he was helpless. It was the awakening of her tardy femininity. She yielded to an impulse to punish him for his shabby treatment of her old friend.

"Let it wait for a few days. Saturday—maybe, or Sunday or Monday. Let's think about it and talk to Aunt Jane. I am so young, Mr. Ooley, I am afraid of making a mistake I could never correct."

The appeal of her youth left him without an answer. He released her and walking primly down the High Street she knew intuitively that he was in the big window watching her. She walked beautifully, with a new swinging grace, tormenting him with the proud lift of her little head.

CHAPTER XXV

THE next two days went by quietly. There was a good deal of work to do, which Elizabeth did mechanically. She enjoyed evading Mr. Ooley. He was now abject, finding a strange coquette in place of the simple girl he had exalted to the high places of his heart. He could not, by force or subtlety, draw near to her. She had asked to let the matter rest, and, with a skill that he could not appreciate, but only feel, she was determined not to talk to him until she had seen Jim again.

Thursday and Friday passed in work. On Friday night Elizabeth walked home, wondering if Jim would make any effort to see her. When she reached home she saw that a light was burning in the parlor, that some one was there, and that Auntie and Mrs. Kemp were sitting in rockers, as if posed for company.

Elizabeth went around to the kitchen, unwilling to talk to any of Mrs. Kemp's customers. But she was no sooner in the house than Aunt Jane called her. She went on into the front room and was astonished to see Mrs. Thorne, lovelier than ever, in the seamstress' best chair.

"You have company, Elizabeth," said Aunt Jane. Elizabeth paused in the door. She was surprised to see Aunt Jane so courteous. If Annie Smail were not fit to live in the house—

"I would like to see Miss Whittaker alone," said Loreen Thorne. Mrs. Kemp and Aunt Jane rose at once and went into the kitchen. As Aunt Jane passed Elizabeth, she touched her hand and gave her a warning look, the sharpness of which surprised the girl. Elizabeth did not know what her aunt intended her to understand, but Aunt Jane closed the kitchen door behind her, and Elizabeth came forward into the lamplight, paused by the small center-table and looked gravely at Mrs. Thorne.

"Won't you sit down?" asked her old enemy, and Elizabeth smiled a little at such an invitation, when she was in her own house.

"Perhaps we shall not be long," she answered. She felt a change in their relationship. If there had been nothing more than Mr. Ooley's declaration and the bright memory of that long day with Jim, to fortify her, she would have been better prepared for an encounter than she had been a year ago. But there was more. Elizabeth, in the last year, had grown into a beauty and loveliness of her own, had found herself equal to hard emergencies. Mrs. Thorne leaned forward in her chair and fixed her bright eyes upon Elizabeth. She was dressed in white linen with long simple lines. She wore a collar of real lace, from which her throat rose white and round and beautiful.

"I want to know where Jim is," she said. She smiled a little, showing the small white teeth between lips red and smooth. "I know he is in town. I saw him day before yesterday, on High Street, coming from your office. I've not seen him since. I've been trying to find him, but haven't been able. It's necessary that I find him."

"I'm sorry I can't help you," said Elizabeth. "I don't know where he is."

Loreen Thorne pressed her lips together in anger, and her eyes pierced Elizabeth for the truth.

"I've got to see him," she said. "I've got to see him about my divorce."

"Are you going to be divorced?"

The question was out before Elizabeth knew. A divorce was a startling matter—a last hopeless extreme in those days.

"Yes," said Mrs. Thorne lightly. "I am going to be divorced. You put it just the way it is. Mr. Thorne is going to sue me for a divorce on the grounds of infidelity, and he has promised to make a settlement with me afterward. I would like to defend the suit—"

Elizabeth felt the woman was lying.

"It doesn't seem like Mr. Thorne to do that," she said. "Why don't you write to Mr. Younger if he is concerned in it in any way?"

Loreen Thorne bit her lips with vexation.

"I have written to him," she said in a low voice.

Elizabeth's heart leaped.

"I believe his brother, old Hal Younger, is interfering with my letters. He does not want Jim to come back to me!"

Elizabeth thought that this was possible. It seemed everybody had to have a finger in everybody else's affairs.

She hesitated, debating whether to tell Mrs. Thorne that she would see Jim in the morning at the office. It would be dreadful if Mrs. Thorne came there after what had happened last summer. As she stood considering what was best to do, Mrs. Thorne spoke sharply:

"What did you do to him that summer day when he went with you to your old farm—that he has never been near me since?"

Elizabeth looked at her in bewilderment.

"I did nothing," she answered steadily. "Perhaps you had better ask yourself that question."

Mrs. Thorne shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh," she said, "I have done him great injury. You see, I have cared for him. That first night we were alone together he said that you saw us, that you were working then at that dingy restaurant he took me to. You were already on the scene. But you—what do *you* know about love?" She rose, and Elizabeth felt that Mrs. Thorne would have destroyed her then, if she could have. "What do you know about waiting—a year? About writing letters and having them returned, about listening for a voice, a footfall, thinking every message would be a message from him. My husband has kept me in such close check I have not been able to go to him, or I would certainly have done so.

"A year!" The words were bitter, terrible. "You have kept him away from me for almost a year—with your slyness. But that time is over for you. I want him back, do you hear me? I will wait no longer. You have all schemed against us. Mr. Thorne, with his crazy jealousy, and that snake, Hal Younger, and that old sly woman in there, and you—all of you have been in a league. He would have come to me. He would have been mine in another month. He came so seldom—he was, for all his boyish ways, so wise and prudent. He was so kind to me—so kind—and gay—"

She paused, seeming to stop her tirade only by the

greatest effort. She swayed a little, and Elizabeth instinctively reached out her hand to catch her.

"You are beside yourself," implored Elizabeth. "You will regret what you are saying. And you are mistaken. Jim Younger is not my lover and never was. Whatever quarrel there has been between you is no concern of mine. I have not seen him since last year, myself, except once, in the office, when he did not talk to me."

Mrs. Thorne looked as though she would like to disbelieve that, but the force of honesty was too strong in Elizabeth. They regarded each other, and in a trice all of Elizabeth's excitement and resentment, all of the old fear of this woman were swept away. For in the dark eyes Elizabeth saw the pain of futile longing. Why—she *had* really loved him! Now, Elizabeth could understand and bear with her.

"I know nothing of him," she went on, after a moment. "He is not accepted in this house, and I have no way of hearing of him any more than you have. I saw Hal Younger once on the street, and spoke of him, but that is all. Waynesville is only twenty miles away, but until he came into the office on business day before yesterday, I had not seen him, either. Won't you believe me?"

Mrs. Thorne laughed a little, and shrugged her shoulders. "Yes, I believe you now," she said, but her discomfort seemed only increased. "Then, if he is not your lover, I have wasted my energies hating you. I never knew any one else that I thought he might care for, but you. I have myself to thank, then, that I have lost him."

She made a little weary gesture, her lace handkerchief in her hand.

"There is no use my worrying you then with my fine lies about my divorce. Mr. Thorne has no intention whatever of divorcing me. He would not admit himself so beaten. I could not get away from him, no matter what I did, and he has taken great pains not to do anything of which I might accuse him. I wanted to wound you—but what my husband believes, what he tried to make you all think that day in Mr. Ooley's office, was never true. Jim was never my lover, although, perhaps, he might have been, in time. Do you believe this?"

"Yes," said Elizabeth, "I believe you."

Mrs. Thorne looked at her strangely. She seemed to be full of self-loathing, seeking in her own mind weapons with which to wound herself.

"You have grown very lovely," she said quietly. She sighed a little and then made a grimace. She picked up her white-silk parasol.

"I have been very vulgar," she said slowly. "You must forgive me. And when you are married, take heed that you don't look at any one else, for it will only bring you pain and humiliation."

"I believe Mr. Younger is coming into Mr. Ooley's office in the morning, again. They have some business. If you would like me to, I can tell him you want to see him."

Again Mrs. Thorne gave Elizabeth that strange look.

"You are generous," she admitted. "I believe my instinct about you was right—that you might become a dangerous rival, a real power. It was jealousy that gave me such insight, for, a year ago, you were not so brave and lovely as you are now."

They were silent, not knowing what to say. And

then, without warning, Mrs. Thorne began to cry. She turned stiffly and leaned against the wall, her back very straight, her hands against her face. She wept desperately, trying not to make any noise. Elizabeth went to her, drew her down into a chair and pulled her hands away from her face. She sat rigid, while Elizabeth patted her and coaxed her softly. At last she turned. Her face sank into the curve of the girl's neck, and she wept there, her tears so full of old bitterness that Elizabeth cried too.

"You see," she whispered to this understanding heart, "I wanted at first to have him love me, so that he would be mine, but I never intended to care for him. I wanted to make my husband jealous. I wanted excitement. And then—I can't tell you how it happened—he was not so accessible as I had thought. He began to distrust me, to arm himself against me, and I came to care for him more than anything else in the world. I have ruined everything for myself, nothing for him. I have humiliated myself a thousand times, and he only grew more remote. There is nothing left—here—" she laid her hand upon her heart and shook her head sadly. "No self-respect—no pride—no satisfaction. Just the madness and the fury."

"But all that is better now."

"Yes, it is all better now. Do you know who really sent me here?"

"No. I couldn't guess."

"Hal Younger. I saw him once, too, as you did, and I accused and upbraided him. He told me outright that he wanted Jim to love you. He said that you could save him—could save me, because you had saved yourself. What did he mean?"

"I don't know," said Elizabeth.

"Well, it is evident he is right about things, for here I am weeping my heart out—you tender young thing. I've never had a sister—never a woman close to me, never a child. But you seem like all three at once. But you can not save me. Nobody can do that."

"But you must go back to your husband," said Elizabeth. "Perhaps it is he who can save you. He cares for you, and he is a wonderful man. Maybe there, in your own home, you'll find everything you lost. I know one thing, that if a person stands fast and waits—"

"The besiegers withdraw?" said the other, smiling a little. And then she explained, "Jim told me once that you were a child with a notion in your head—something about a tower."

"Yes," said Elizabeth soberly, "but it is more than that. I can't explain it. It's only that one mustn't ever run down one's banner. But I can not tell you, for I'm not sure myself. It is all so vague—"

"Not at all. It is as clear as your face. And you advise me to go back to my husband and find love there? It seems an impossible thing, but I will do it. I will be guided by you, you see."

Elizabeth saw that she had quite recovered her poise and had become mocking again, so she arose from her knees, and Mrs. Thorne left with few more words. Elizabeth waited a little before she went back into the kitchen to the two curious old women. But it soon became evident that she intended to tell them nothing, and Mrs. Kent finally retired to her room unsatisfied.

"I was afraid she might hurt you," said Aunt Jane at once. "I was trembling all the time she was in there."

"Hurt me?" exclaimed Elizabeth.

"Yes, hurt you. I think she came here intending to kill you."

This was anticlimax, and Elizabeth laughed.

"Nothing like that, Aunt Jane," she said. "She just wanted to have a little talk with me. No, you mustn't ask me, for I am not going to tell you a thing."

But later she lay staring wide-eyed at the reflection of leaves on the white bedroom wall. A wish rose up in her, strong and straight.

"Aunt Jane's right about things—and so is Mr. Ooley, but they don't go at them the right way. But oh, I don't want ever to love anybody more than I love what's right."

CHAPTER XXVI

SATURDAY morning was crowded with business affairs that took Mr. Ooley's whole attention. He was expecting Mr. Younger directly after lunch.

"I'll be late," he told Elizabeth. "He can wait for me."

Elizabeth felt that this was only a method of postponing his favors and of humbling Younger further. She said she would deliver the message. She hurried through her lunch and returned to the office. She found herself looking out of the window for Jim. But she gave this up and went back to work, so that when he did come in quietly, she was at her desk and neither saw nor heard him.

He came and leaned against the end of the high desk and looked at her without speaking.

Elizabeth turned. Her face was on a level with his, and blue eyes met blue eyes in a long silent moment. Then Elizabeth's heart opened, and a well of compassion poured from it. All the artificiality of the mood that had held her for three days vanished as though it had never belonged to her, as, indeed, it never had. She was at once herself, natural, kind, simple and sweet.

The man before her was very pale. His eyes looked out at her haggardly, filled with self-loathing. There was a heavy stubble of beard on his face, blurring and marring its strong ardent lines. His skin was stained

with blue blotches. Great dark rings lay around his eyes. His dented hat was thrust back on his head so that his curly hair stood up in disorder. His clothes were dirty, awry. He looked—which was true—as if he had just come out of the gutter.

But all this was lost, forgotten, in the look of his eyes. Stark tragedy looked out at Elizabeth, eyes so sad, that she felt the tears stinging and burning in her own. She reached out and gently, kindly, laid her hand over the grimy one that steadied him against her desk.

"You must not let Mr. Ooley see you like this, Jim," she said. There it was again. They were, at once, without preliminaries, in the midst of a relationship intimate, basic.

"I don't care for Mr. Ooley," he said, with an effort at scorn.

"He is so terribly prejudiced," she explained, gently. "You would never get another penny's credit here. You would have to go elsewhere. Jim, you must do as I ask you. You must go to your hotel, get a bath, a shave, clean clothes and something to eat—hot coffee, I believe, is what you need. Then come back here. I'll tell him you came and left and will return at four. Will you do this for me?"

"I don't like to—" he said uncertainly. He was growing sober, but he was completely exhausted by three days' continuous drinking.

"Is this why you wanted an answer on Wednesday—so you would be free?" she asked.

"It was coming on me. My throat burned so as I sat there talking to him—it was hard to keep from a quarrel. I wanted to get away with the business finished."

"Jim," she said, her clean little hand still on his, "does it only come to you at times, this way? Can't you do anything about it?"

His eyes came back to her, and there was surprise in his look.

"Do you care?" he asked.

"More than about anything in the world," she said, so softly and sincerely that he was shaken.

"You were always different from other persons. I can't tell you about it. It's my devil, that's all. I don't know as I want to do anything about it. It comes to me at times."

"I have heard about that," she said with the same gentle wisdom. "But is it over—for this time?"

"I reckon," he said heavily. She became very practical and businesslike.

"You must do as I tell you and go at once. Go to your hotel and do as I said. Then come back here, and you will get your credit."

"All right," he said humbly, "I'll go. But I'm doing it for you—because you've got enough heart to ask it—not because I want to please that hell-hound, Ooley."

"I know how you feel about him," she comforted the sinner. "But I'll be so distressed if he finds you here. Another thing, Jim—I may not get a chance to talk to you when he comes back—I want you to come right straight here to me the next time you feel as though you are going to fail. Come here first to me, will you, Jim?"

"All right, little girl." He turned to go, but his hand still lay under hers. He bent his head, and caressed her hand roughly with his bearded cheek.

"I didn't used to be this way," he explained to her,

a puzzled sort of frown between his eyes. "I just drank all the time—every day—any amount. Sometimes I felt it, more often not. Then—I can't tell you why—but I got scared and decided to quit. I did quit, too—for three months, and ever since I've been this way—it's worse really—I can almost mark the day on the calendar when I've got to go on a spree."

"I think maybe it is worse," she said gently. "But I can see how it came about. You go on now."

He went, and Elizabeth turned back to her work. The office was still. She remembered the saw salesman, sitting there, red-faced, bluff, with white hair and twinkling eyes. How full of emotion she had been that exciting day. But now her heart was quiet. It was a staunch little heart, warm and sweet, as though love itself had laid a hand upon it.

Mr. Ooley came in presently and was surprised that Younger was not waiting.

"He had some other business to attend to. I told him to come back at four o'clock. Surely you intend to give him the time, Mr. Ooley?"

"I think perhaps I will. My partner wishes it. Younger is very popular with a good many farmers and traders. He's a man with considerable influence. A man who might have amounted to much, my dear, but for the curse of his evil habits."

"Yes," said Elizabeth meekly.

She was at times an amanuensis for him. Now she gave him his letters. He signed them, and she folded them and addressed them in her small neat script. Ooley stood beside her, watching her.

"You're like yourself again, to-day," he told her

presently, looking at the small curls growing on the nape of her neck. "I've not known you lately. Are you going to tell me to-day? I hadn't somehow expected to have to wait for you so—I didn't know you could be so notionate, Elizabeth."

"I didn't know it either," she told him slowly. "I should have told you three days ago that we can't ever marry. It—it's just not right, Mr. Ooley. I admire you so much—you're the only man I ever see much of—you've been so kind to me. But that's not the way you want me to feel, and I can't feel more. Every girl hopes for love—"

"But I give you that—" he said, his face pale with surprise.

"But I do not give it to you—love, given and returned—"

She spoke dreamily. He had an uncomfortable sense that her thoughts were far away. His brow reddened with anger.

"Are you playing fast and loose with me, Elizabeth? I made an avowal and asked you, honorably, to be my wife. I thought—that day we first talked—I felt you so near to me. What has happened now? What's come over you?" His tone was almost rough, but Elizabeth was composed.

"I can't tell you that, because I don't know, but I feel that I am not ready to marry any one. I can always quit here, if you don't want me to stay."

"No, no!" he said, with horror. "I don't want you to do that. I'm not trying to force you from your work. You need it. Besides, perhaps you will feel differently——"

"I don't think so, Mr. Ooley." She was becoming agitated now. She felt silly tears pressing against her. "I—we're so far apart—worlds. I would like to keep my work, to stay here, but I can't stay—if—if you are going to talk to me about this—" she faltered into silence. Mr. Ooley stood beside her, stricken dumb. Elizabeth felt exactly as if he were going to say something, but no words came from his mouth.

"I — you'd better get somebody else to do this work." She spoke steadily, but her thoughts raced wildly over the question of what she could do. She could go back to the restaurant if Mr. Stuart would take her—she might even keep house for Ole. And while her mind considered all these unpleasant possibilities, her heart was hurt for him.

At last he turned without a word, but with a gesture of despair and sat down at his desk. He sat there for a long while without moving, and then she heard his pen, scratching, scratching again at his letters. He was still at work when Younger came in. The two men conducted their business with as few words as possible. They went over the list Younger had. Elizabeth, called to the desk, made out the bills, and Ooley O. K.'d them. He seemed scarcely aware when Younger left. Elizabeth noticed that the latter was still pale, but he was in order now—in his right mind. His clothing was neat, even with a trace of his usual elegance. He had on a different suit, and a blue scarf tied about his colored shirt collar. His hair was combed, and he was shaved. His hat no longer was dusty and dented, but set squarely on his head, and the small mustache shadowed the slight tremble of his mouth. The scars of his recent debauch were still visible,

and had Mr. Ooley been more alert, even Elizabeth's recommended treatment of bath, rest and food, would not have hidden the truth from the sharp eyes, but the prohibitionist was absorbed in his own pain.

"You give these to Miss Whittaker. She can finish this business," he said, shoving everything into Jim's hands. He turned back to the desk and took up his pen.

Younger came and stood beside Elizabeth's desk. As she entered and checked, he took a small pad and with a pencil he wrote on it: "What makes you so kind?"

Elizabeth glanced at it, but gave no answer, made no sign. She felt queerly ashamed to be whispering and writing notes behind Mr. Ooley's back. She had not been kind to *him!*

When she had finished and was ready to go home, Mr. Ooley was sitting at his desk in the swivel chair, waiting to speak to her. He held an envelope in his hands, a thick one, with something written on it.

"Good night, Elizabeth," he said quietly. He held the letter out and laid it in her palm. "When you get home and have rested, I want you to read this!"

She took it from him. A sense of farewell came over her. She stood awkwardly, a little girl, shy, incoherent, hardly knowing what she felt, confusion overwhelming her.

"Good-by," she said, and stood there, her eyes suffused with tears.

He could think of nothing to say to help her, and after a moment or two, she turned and went out of the office. It was a most unsatisfactory leave-taking, lacking, Elizabeth felt, all its latent dramatic fitness and leaving her unexpectedly sad and discomfited.

CHAPTER XXVII

Elizabeth, with Mr. Ooley's letter in her hand, found Jim standing on the corner that led from High Street into North Street and so to her home.

"Your aunt will not mind if I walk a way with you?" he said.

"I couldn't say that, Jim, but I'd like you to come, anyhow," she answered. "I didn't know—until a few months ago, that she had written to you last summer. I would have opposed her doing it, if I could."

"You see now," he replied, "that she was right about it, don't you?"

"No," said Elizabeth, "I don't see that. You're always the same to me, Jim."

"But you saw me to-day—you should have seen me yesterday, and you wouldn't walk on the street with me."

She could not bear for him to be humble, and she protested quickly.

"I'd never be ashamed of you—never. Don't say such a thing. Why, Jim—you're practically the only friend I have. Aunt Jane sent Annie away. Jim, do you know where she is?"

"No, I don't. I've been keeping away from Coal City for reasons of my own. But I feel sorry for Annie Smail. She's made a mess of things. It's easy to do.

Some folks have a gift for it. You never see her any more?"

"No," she answered, and told him what little she knew.

"I could have told her Mock was married," he answered soberly. "But Annie was always—well, wild. I supposed she knew what she was about. He's a crazy kind of person—married in cold blood, for money, but he was always in love with Annie. Only he's ambitious, and she was no kind of ladder to step up on."

"Jim," said Elizabeth, "you should have told me long ago that he was married. It might have made a lot of difference to Annie—then. I know she never knew it, for she expected to marry him herself."

"Perhaps," he answered, "but it isn't my way to go about straightening out affairs. My own are too complicated. But Elizabeth, I want you to know one thing. After that day we had together last summer, I never came back to Coal City—to go to Thorne's, as I'd been doing. It— I can't say how it was with me— I don't know, but that door was shut. I felt that I'd a right to think too much of myself to be playing dandy to somebody so—well, so rich and secure. I could have struck her that day in Ooley's office when I found her pulling you about."

They walked along in silence, Jim absorbed in some thought of his own.

"It's a shame," he exclaimed. "You ought to have some fun. Hal has ding-donged at me about business until he'll make an old settled man out of me yet. I hate to stick at work so everlastingly hard. I can do well enough, but there's the whole world calling. So long as I'm sober, I can have a great time."

"Jim, why didn't you tell me—that summer day last year, about this—this trouble of yours?"

"I couldn't," he answered. They were coming near her house and unconsciously their feet lagged until they almost stopped. "I was too humiliated. I wanted to wipe it from your mind—not impress it there with talk. But now— I've no shame before you any more, Elizabeth. You're so kind—I feel that you don't hate me as you ought. I've never known anybody like you. I always seem to rouse one feeling or another. Either people want to follow me—do what I do and keep me company in my bad ways, or else they hate me like poison itself. But you are so gentle, and yet—you're still where you were last summer, where Aunt Jane reminded me you were—worlds away."

"Not I," she said. "I'm nearer than you think. I have my troubles and my hard times just the same as you. And I get lonely——"

It was as near as she would ever come to an appeal. They had stopped now, altogether, a little distance from her gate.

"I can't be your friend. Your aunt is right about it, I tell you. Elizabeth—we could have such happy days. I know I could make them happy for you. I'd like to go on back to my own early twenties again and be a beau for you, and take you to dances and on hay rides and out in a cutter, in the winter, and even take you to the opera house some time, but then—it would come around again—this bad time for me—and what of that? I'd disgrace you—make you loathe me—make every one scorn me for taking your time. I don't know—I've never before in my life talked to any one about it. I threatened Hal once—I said I'd kill him when he tried to talk to me about my drunkenness. None of my friends dare men-

tion it to me. It comes and goes and they all ignore it. But it's so easy to tell you—and yet, you are so young and innocent of life—"

"Then you'll not be my friend?"

"No," he said, "I'll not."

"Would you let me be yours?"

"What do you mean, Elizabeth?"

"Just this—" she said, and although she smiled at him, there were tears in her eyes, a quiver on her mouth. "If you won't share your good times, then share the bad ones. Remember the promise you made in the office and come back to me next time—how long will it be, Jim?"

"About two months."

"And you'll come back?"

"I'll say I will, now, but when the time comes—I may not want to. That's the curse of it. When I'm sober I want to stay so. When I'm drunk, I don't want to be sober. Can't you see?"

"But if you promised?"

"All right," he said, with sudden resolution. "I'll promise you."

He shook hands with her and went quickly down North Street, and Elizabeth stopped at her gate and watched him as long as she could see his figure.

She went into the house and ate her supper, and finally, with strange reluctance, she opened Mr. Ooley's letter. It proved to be a long one. He had spent the afternoon, she realized, writing it. It set forth many facts, but those that were vital were in the last paragraph.

"I've an opportunity," he wrote, "to go to Illinois to organize the dry forces there. There is a chance that I may be secretary of the national prohibition organization in a few years. I had hoped I should have you to help me with this work. I'll see Mr. Westlock over the week-end and make arrangements with him to come into the office, and I am going away. I do not understand you, Elizabeth, but I shall always love you. You are so young and good, and so unprotected. I wish I could do something for you—could somehow throw a barrier between you and the world, but that is not my privilege now. So good-by, dear, and do not altogether forget me.

"Samuel Ooley."

So it had been farewell! Elizabeth's throat ached intolerably. He was leaving—for a trip that had been planned as a honeymoon, if she had been willing to go! She saw correctly in his departure only a great kindness to her. He was sparing her the ordeal of being reproached by his presence, being made uncomfortable at her work. Who was she—that he should do so much for her? She turned the pages, wondering desperately why her love had been so strongly withheld from a man capable of such kindness, such sacrifice. Why had it fixed itself on some one considered, even by himself, as unsuitable?

And so she came face to face at last with the fact that she was in love with Jim Younger. All the childish adoration, all the adolescent dreaming had come now into the crux of a true emotion. He was her own man, her love, and should he never take his place in her life as such, her whole life would be emptied, devastated. And so seeing, she, the little one, the innocent one, the good one, found herself face to face with the enemy to

all her happiness, all the peace and fulfillment of her life—face to face with something so dark and sinister that she could only sense it, as ancient heroes sensed the presence of a dragon in the dark.

And sitting there alone by the kitchen table with Mr. Ooley's letter—the pages as dry and crackling as his own dry mind—she knew that his way was a futile one—one which antagonized, aroused and exaggerated faults such as Jim possessed—slaveries such as that which bound him. There must be some other way—something—God would show her—she would find it. She had always found the way—somehow——

Aunt Jane came in upon her sitting there. The old woman seemed quiet, but with a change that at once drew Elizabeth's attention. There were about her to-night traces of her old sanity, a look in her eyes—clear and good. She put her pretense at knitting into her lap and bent upon Elizabeth a gaze so kind and intelligent that Elizabeth felt the return of the old character she loved so. Impulsively she put the pages of Mr. Ooley's letter in her aunt's hand. Aunt Jane read them. They explained themselves.

"I'm sorry, Elizabeth," said her aunt, who had lighted the lamp to read the letter. "He is a good man. I thought you might marry him."

Elizabeth looked up in utter astonishment.

"I thought perhaps if you married him it would end forever your relationship with Jim Younger. That is a thing I've always feared, always wanted to see definitely ended."

Elizabeth said nothing.

"I hoped to see you settled, see you fixed for life,"

the aunt continued slowly. "You're so young and inexperienced—"

Elizabeth was growing tired of this imputation.

"I'm not afraid," she said, after a minute. "I can work. I can care for myself. Don't worry about me, Aunt Jane."

"But I do," said the other, and then Elizabeth divined what had caused that quickening of the old intelligence that made her aunt seem so near and real again. It was fear—it was realization—it was the beginning of the end of life itself.

"I've had such a pain at my heart all day—it only left a little while before you came in. I feel as if my life were going—swiftly, so that I can not hold it much longer. Elizabeth—to-day my heart swelled in my breast so that I thought I would die. Afterward, when I sat here resting, my whole thought was for you. I've not been myself. I could see you—working away like a little soldier. Why, I've been a terrible burden to you—an old man of the sea, hung about your neck. It'll be a good thing—when I'm gone."

"Oh, no!" cried Elizabeth, and so passionate, so deep was her love, she ran around the table and seized this woman who had been mother and child both to her, in a warm embrace. Tears streamed down her face. "Oh, no, Aunt Jane. You must never leave me—never. I'll be all alone—promise me you will stay with me."

"Ah, if I only could—or if, going—I could see you safe!"

Elizabeth's arms tightened about Aunt Jane as though she would never let her go.

"You're not going," she cried vehemently; "you're

not going. I can't let you—" Life was so quick within her—death so remote—Aunt Jane must never die!

"Hush, dear," said the other, grown strong now again, and again the mother, tender and comforting. "I should never have told you. But you must remember—there's no reason for me to cling on here— I'm alone here, except for you. I want to go on, to my husband—back again, in life, or on to some other experience. I am infinitely weary—" She stopped, and they clung together in a breathless silence, and it seemed to Elizabeth almost as if the very vitality of the other vanished beneath her holding, grasping hands——

"There's just one thing——" Aunt Jane's voice was growing weak and flat again, after the brief period of energy—— "I want to tell you—I saw you to-night. Elizabeth, it came to me to-day about Jim Younger, that I must not bind you with my old hatreds. It's hard to change. But your life is young—you must do as you want to do. You must go ahead—unhampered by my will. I just intended to tell you——"

Elizabeth smiled with stiff lips, remembering the night Aunt Jane had promised her that Uncle should not take her doll——

And now, again, she must stay her desire—to flee from something she could not overcome, to cling and cry, and be a little girl——

"I'm going to think you are mistaken about yourself. And as for Jim—well, Auntie, I don't know that anything will ever come of that. Mr. Ooley will come back some day, perhaps. Come on, now, and let me tuck you in bed."

She did so, and now it was she who brushed the aunt's

hair, who helped undress the weary body, who put a child to bed. When she had finished she picked up her doll, straightened out its skirt, and set it down again with the vexatious small thump an impatient mother bestows upon a stupid child.

She got into bed herself, pulled the sheet up to her chin and turned her puckered face to the wall, squeezing back the tears that filled her eyes.

"I don't care," she thought fiercely. "I'm glad I didn't marry him. He's old—he's never seen a mirage—never knew there were lavender shadows on the snow—toward spring. I don't want him—old dry-bones. I don't want anybody. I want to be a little girl again and drive the cows home from the pasture, and sleep in the loft, and run barefoot, and cry when I'm hurt—oh—oh—"

But cry she could not, and although she could not still her inward weeping, she hid her face under her arm and lay without moving until the old woman finally fell into her heavy unresting slumber.

CHAPTER XXVIII

EARLY summer was hot. Elizabeth found Mr. Westlock an uncertain kind of employer. His methods were not the exact and painstaking ones of Mr. Ooley. He was not so deliberate, so considerate of her tasks. He was more temperamental. He knew nothing whatever about accounts. He demanded facts suddenly, and could never wait a moment for them. He left a greater burden of work to her, could not understand why she had not written certain letters—done tasks for which he had given her no directions.

It was a vexatious life. Her smallness, her childishness affected him not at all. She was a bookkeeper. She realized with some chagrin, that she had depended more than she knew on Mr. Ooley's obvious devotion. This realization stiffened her pride, made her more exact, more industrious. She was getting a big salary for a young woman, in those days, and she would have to earn it. She worked hard and for long hours. She met Mr. Westlock's outbursts of temperament with evenness, striving to be impersonal about everything.

But it is difficult to be impersonal about everything when one is eighteen. Elizabeth fell again into the way of dreaming about Jim Younger. Aunt Jane had lapsed back into her vagueness, and the girl sat often on the little back porch in the evening with her silent

companion, her small head tilted, her eyes on the far wheeling prairie stars, while between her eyes and their beauty hung a veil of ardent pictures—a printed tapestry of life and color. Mr. Ooley's proposal, the glimpse of his passion, had stiffened her self-esteem. She dared now paint pictures that her more modest inexperience would not have toyed with. Jim became to her both knight and hero. His intelligence, she felt, was nimble. His wit, his joviality surpassed that of other men. He was braver, stronger. Incredible deeds were possible to him. She wove with youth for the woof, and love for the warp, a surpassing fabric. At no time did the dark picture of him, as he had come in the office at noon the day she had last seen him, disturb her. All that, she felt confident now, her influence could alter, and this hope of serving and bettering him, of bringing him peace and freedom, added the last touch of generous mothering to her romantic passion, like the sweet breath hovering about a perfect blossom.

One night she was awakened to utter, terrible silence. She rose at once, cold with elemental fear. Her hand shook so as she lit the lamp and tried to fit the globe, that the thin glass made a bright castanet of sound against the frame.

The light, wan at first, then growing steadier, revealed to her Aunt Jane's face, set in a mask of pain, the great eyes fixed on her in desperate imploring.

"What is it, Aunt Jane? What's the matter?"

There was no answer, no movement—only the pleading eyes.

"Can't you speak to me? Can't you tell me?"

Nothing—not a sound—not even a moan.

Elizabeth ran, in her cotton nightie, with its long sleeves and high neck-band, into Mrs. Kent's room. The dressmaker was sleeping, her head thrown back, a long heavy braid of black and gray hair winding on the pillow. Elizabeth shook her, roused her. It was an hour before the doctor came to them, and after he came there was still no response from the figure on the bed, save the slow, hard pulse, the warmth of life, stubborn life, warming and feeding immobile limbs and silent tongue.

It was three days before Aunt Jane died, and in those three days Elizabeth sat by her side constantly, her own dreams and problems forgotten, her whole being pouring out in blessed, comforting love. It was toward morning when the old lady finally passed on. She could not emerge to another dawn, another period of life that was already death.

And Elizabeth was alone.

She trembled, as it was borne in upon her. Mr. Ooley, symbol of kindness, was gone. Aunt Jane was gone. A sort of fatalistic tragedy took hold of the girl's heart. Every one whom she loved had left her. The brief bloom of the early summer seemed devoured in drought. She came and went quietly, accepting Mrs. Kent's efforts at kindness with a strange remoteness. There was only one person who could have brought her comfort, and there came no word from him. The day after the funeral she sat down to write to him, but pride forbade her. The death notice had been set in the paper. He should have known she was bereaved. But he might not have seen it—her quick heart defended. He would have come to her. He was her friend—the only real friend she had in all the world. He would

have come, flying, and rescued her—from what? She was not sure, except the horrible consciousness of being all alone.

She took her doll to bed with her, thinking she would never sleep, and fell at once into the deep, refreshing, healing slumber of childhood. She arose refreshed and prepared a breakfast which she found, to her own surprise, she enjoyed. These indications of early physical recuperation did not fit in with the great sense of tragedy that dwelt in her heart. But the healthy young body could not faint and fall so easily. It must thrive of its own fresh energy, and Elizabeth found, walking back and forth to work, trying to put her distressed mind on her tasks, that her heart and mind must follow this strong bright current of life—must ride upon it.

Ole came to see her, looking worse than ever.

"You come back by the farm?" he asked her, and she smiled and shook her head. She could never be unkind to Ole, as unkindness was not in her, and she shook his hand and invited him to sit down, hiding her revulsion against his physical coarseness. It was the day the will was to be probated. Mr. Westlock had let her have the day, with an air of impatience. Elizabeth felt that he was biding his time for some demonstration of his disapproval. She had found her work in a great tangle when she returned and had fallen upon it with desperate energy, seeking to forget her grief in the unraveling of bills and invoices, notes due and notes extended.

The house was hers. Aunt Jane had been careful to make a will so that none of her cousins in the East could take her little possessions from Elizabeth, who was, in reality, no kin to Aunt Jane. There was also some

money—not quite a thousand dollars, but to Elizabeth it seemed vast riches. She had not known that Aunt Jane had this money. It was what had been paid in on notes from the farm sale when the stock and implements had been sold, some to Ole, some to others. Elizabeth had completely forgotten, but now it was hers. She felt a strong sense of security that would have gladdened the heart of the old woman who loved her so. She had a house, she had some money. The loss of her job, the accidents of life, could not now destroy her as they had once threatened to do.

"It's as though Aunt Jane hadn't left me, now," she said to the kindly judge in the probate court. "I feel as if I still had her—her house and all this money."

"Take good care of your money, lass, and don't let anybody marry you for it," said the judge. Elizabeth heard the bright tinkle of her own laugh—a sound that had not fallen on her ears for days. She was instantly ashamed and felt sober.

"And remember," went on the discerning judge, "your aunt would want you to be happy. If she could see your grieving little face—it would break her heart. If you would please her, turn back to the ways of your girlhood, buy a pretty frock or two and make some young friends."

He inquired into her life, and Elizabeth told him. Mrs. Kent lived with her, she worked for Westlock and Ooley. The keen old eye turned bright.

"And you're the one Sam Ooley broke his hard old heart upon?" he asked, and then, at the painful flood of color that suffused Elizabeth's face, he added kindly:

"You did well, Elizabeth Whittaker. Wait for youth and love to come to you, but mind you don't marry any rapscallion."

Elizabeth thanked him softly for his advice and left. Ole had his farm wagon and offered to drive her home, but she told him she wanted to walk. She was not often out in the afternoon, except Sunday. The kind fierce little blue eyes devoured her.

"Honey," he said with sudden tenderness. "You ever see Jim Younger?"

"He came into the office once," said Elizabeth, knowing that she was giving him a false idea.

Ole seemed satisfied, and she stood on the wooden sidewalk and watched his great team go prancing away with the big green wagon bouncing behind it.

She walked slowly down High Street, released again from heartache. Her money had been paid into the bank for her. The house was already transferred to her name. The street was busy, this summer day. Elizabeth looked in the store windows, feeling rich to think she might buy what she liked in a little while. Great teams pulled drays through the cobbled highway. Carriages, with ladies inside, passed by. Elizabeth walked and stared and felt the desire for a companion. And then, ahead of her, she saw a woman walking slowly, despondently, her head drooping forward—her figure swaying a little.

Elizabeth watched her, with a strange quickening.

"It looks like somebody I know—Annie—but no, it can't be Annie," she decided, for the woman was obviously in ill health.

Elizabeth, nevertheless, drew nearer to the figure walking so slowly, and with such evident effort, along the wooden sidewalk. The stranger turned into Elizabeth's own street that led up the hill, and as the gradient came beneath her, her footsteps faltered. She was well-

dressed, a brave bright hat sailing above her great pompadour. Her dress was bright green, a dotted voile, covered with yards of lace that foamed about her uncertain feet. Elizabeth drew beside her and looked into her face.

"Annie!" she cried.

The other stopped, and the two stood on the street and stared at each other. Annie Smail swayed as she stood, and Elizabeth put out a hand and caught at her.

CHAPTER XXIX

"WHAT'S the matter, Annie?" she cried. "Are you ill?"

Annie laughed hoarsely—a terrible sound.

"Can't you see what's the matter with me?" she asked, her laughter falling into a grimace of bitterness. Elizabeth could see. Her own face grew pale, her eyes large and dark with pain and pity.

"But Annie—why are you out here—like this—on the street. You ought to be home. You ought to be taken care of. Where is your husband?"

"Where? Where he's always been—in the land of promise." Annie laughed at her joke. It was evident she still had her cynical frivolity. "I've no home," she added, with utter simplicity. "I've been boarding in Harlton Street and they put me out. I went to a hotel across the river—in Mining Town, but now my money's gone. I've just been on my way to your house. I heard your aunt was dead. I thought maybe you'd take me for a few days. But I don't care if you don't. The river's a good bed——"

"Can you walk that far?" asked Elizabeth gently. They went on together in silence a little way. Elizabeth saw with what effort the other placed her feet—how difficult and painful the walking was for her. Annie's face twisted and a sort of hollow moan came from her.

"I'm sick," she said to Elizabeth. "My time's come on me."

Elizabeth looked desperately about. She wished, frantically, for Ole and his great team. There were only a few persons on this side street, women coming from market, their long skirts swirling behind them—children playing under a young tree—a boy with a kite. She called the boy and gave him a coin from her purse.

"Run back to High Street and get us a carriage or a cab—something," she told him. "My friend is ill."

The boy stared, his small mouth open, but Elizabeth spoke to him with such sudden fierceness that he turned and ran down the slope of the walk toward the High Street. The two women stood and waited. Elizabeth begged Annie to sit down on the wooden steps of a porch, but Annie would not do it, standing grimly, swaying a little, making jests at her own grave difficulty. A man with a horse and buggy came at last, the boy riding on the step. It was a farmer come in town on an errand and the boy had stopped him. Elizabeth saw, with some dismay, that the man was an old neighbor, Dereck, who knew both herself and Annie Smail.

"So you got Teacher, 'Lizabeth," he said, and made room for them beside him on the single seat. Annie thrust her hat farther forward on her head and bore herself with considerable pride. She had not lost all her old flamboyance, but she was changed, bolder and harder. Elizabeth sat beside her, making herself small in the seat, suffering more humiliation for Annie than the other felt.

They came to the house at last and the old neighbor refused pay for his service. But he stood watching them go in, his little eyes greedy and light in his face. Mrs.

Kent had a customer in the front room and she stared, without speaking. Elizabeth went on to her own room with Annie.

"You'll have to get me a doctor, Elizabeth," said Annie. "I'm sorry for all the trouble—but I'm so sick——" she leaned against the foot of the bed, her hands straining on the post till the knuckles stood out white. All her brave finery was travesty. Her pain stripped and mocked her. Elizabeth did not have any idea what must be done, but she slipped out of the back door and sent a neighbor boy for the doctor.

The lad's mother thought that Mrs. Kent, with whom she had been friendly, had fallen ill, and she came in to ask if she could not do something. The two women came into the kitchen and confronted Elizabeth.

"Isn't that Annie Smail, who used to teach in the Harlton Street school?" asked Mrs. Kent.

"Yes," said Elizabeth, standing defensively before the bedroom door.

"What's she doing here? She's a bad girl. You can't have her here."

"It's my house," said Elizabeth, surprised at her own firmness.

"Well, then, it's not mine, if that's the kind of a place it is," answered the virtuous seamstress, and there was a kind of fury in her voice that made Elizabeth think of Aunt Jane's tone, months before, when she said with such unexpected animation: "I don't like Annie."

Mrs. Kent stood watching Elizabeth, who did not speak.

"You heard me?" she demanded at last. "I'll go, if she stays."

"I can't turn her out, Mrs. Kent. She's sick," said Elizabeth.

"What did she expect? This is a high time to cry about sickness. Running out all night—on the streets with a married man—was she so young and innocent she didn't know what would befall her?"

"Hush, she will hear you!"

"She's doubtless heard all this before. Well, I'm going. I'll pack my trunk and send for it. I've no place to go, but I'll not stay here."

"You can come to me until you find a place," said the neighbor, primly.

Elizabeth went in to Annie and helped her to go to bed. She scarcely noticed when the front door slammed, later. The doctor came. He was not so particular as the women. He stripped off his coat. He opened his bag and set it on a chair. Annie was rolling and tumbling in Elizabeth's white bed, the covers pressed against her mouth. The doctor turned, his hands on his fat hips, and looked at Elizabeth with discernment.

"This is no place for you," he said sternly. "Go to the hospital and get a nurse. Has she any money?" he indicated Annie.

"It'll all be paid for," said Elizabeth.

"I wasn't thinking of myself," said the doctor, frowning. "I was thinking of the nurse. Go—take this—" he scribbled a name on a card and a short message. "Ask for Miss Lunt. Tell her it's an emergency, to come quickly."

But it was an hour and a half before Elizabeth came back with the nurse. She sat by the kitchen window, as night fell, listening in spite of herself to the anguished

sounds. The doctor went away to see another patient and returned. Elizabeth felt a barrier about her house—invisible, but real. She was harboring a leper. No one came to her door, no one sent a query or a message. The usual running in and out with jelly and soup that accompanied a neighborhood sickness, was missing. Elizabeth sat without moving. She had forgotten to eat. All her being was caught up, swung, in clear pity. It was the forging of the last link in her character.

"Dear God," she whispered, pleading, while the tears ran down her face, "no matter what she's done—no matter what—don't let her suffer so. She can't bear to suffer so. She was so pretty—she's always wanted everything—" No matter what she had done—here were punishment and pain and sorrow.

And to Elizabeth—to the fine clear young mind—trained for years in expediency, in work, disciplined as many an older mind was not by self-sacrifice and sorrow and loneliness, there came a clear ray of intelligence. Annie was paying the price that Eve must always pay for carnal knowledge. But she had not the compensations of social approval. The physical anguish would be the same, were she thrice a wife. But then there would be anxiety, loving care, a tender hand holding her own, a heart striving with her heart, the machinery of society, the sanction of marriage; but for Annie there could be no such comfort, no such compensating joy. There could come only the release from pain. There would be only bleakness following the dark night.

Mr. Mock had been married. That Annie knew nothing of this, Elizabeth was sure. Or at least, if she had knowledge, it came too late for her. Elizabeth felt dimly

a certain admiration for the other's bravado, her effort to hide her pain and humiliation.

The night of vigil, with its long silence of thinking, passed. Elizabeth saw dawn break above the housetops, the thinning and dissolving of night. She lit the fire and made coffee and stood outside the closed door, from which now came no sound at all.

"I've made coffee for you," she said at last, quietly, and tapped on the door. After a little the nurse came out and sat down at the end of the kitchen table. She was pale and weary and she looked at Elizabeth out of disillusioned eyes.

"How's Annie?" asked the young girl anxiously.

"Her baby was still born. She'll be all right."

CHAPTER XXX

Elizabeth found herself heavy with weariness at the office, but by an effort of will she kept her mind on her work and her eyes open. Mr. Westlock, she felt instinctively, would tolerate no more holidays. He was at the end of his patience with her. But all morning, as she worked, her mind was filled with one startling fact—Annie's baby had been born dead. Unreasonable as such a supposition was, contrary to all facts of biology, yet Elizabeth believed with innate conviction that this would not have been so under other circumstances. If Annie had been happily in love—happily married——

She felt unequal to the long walk up the hill at noon. There were plenty of provisions for the nurse to cook for herself and Annie, so Elizabeth went down High Street and crossed into the old railroad restaurant, where she had spent so many months. She wanted to send a message to Ole. Mr. Stuart saw her and waited on her himself, joking and laughing and asking her when she would come back to work for them.

Elizabeth, thinking of Mr. Westlock's frowning eyes and the fierce tilt of his mustaches as she had gone out to lunch, felt that this might be soon, so she only smiled and answered him with vagueness. Her premonition proved to have some foundation when she returned to the

office. Mr. Westlock was standing by her desk, tapping on the polished wood with impatient fingers.

"Elizabeth," he said to her sternly, "I heard at noon that Annie Smail is at your house. She's been the scandal of this town for months. I did not suppose a girl like you would even know her."

"I did not know she had been a scandal," said Elizabeth, trying to control the flutter in her throat, the tremble of her voice and limbs. "She was my schoolteacher only five years ago. She lived with Aunt Jane and me for over a year. I've known her a long time. She—she wasn't well when I met her yesterday. I took her home. What else could I do?"

"Anything else, it seems to me," answered Westlock, and he looked so ferocious that Elizabeth quailed. "We've got a county poor farm for such patients. And there are state institutions as well. I was told that Mrs. Kent left the house immediately, as any decent woman would have done. My wife thinks this is scandalous conduct and only your youth and inexperience can explain it. I don't doubt Annie Smail has taken advantage of you."

He paused. He did not know how to question her, what more to say. The delicacy which covered such affairs in the old century was still upon him. One could not speak of a "bad" woman to a virtuous one. Annie's difficulty—a child born out of wedlock, was a thing that could not be mentioned in so many words, but must be circumvented, surrounded by vague illusions. But one purpose was fixed in his mind. He dropped Annie from the conversation.

"I promised Mr. Ooley I'd keep you here in his absence, but this, I feel, absolves me from all promise.

This whole situation will be told all over Coal City by night. You will stay here until day after to-morrow, which is Saturday, and you will then get two weeks' pay from me and leave. I'm sorry, but I see no other course open to me."

He turned abruptly to his desk, his face red, his eyes alight and angry. Elizabeth took off her hat and went on with her work. It did not matter. Mr. Ooley, she realized with sudden discernment of the harsher side of his character, would have acted as Mr. Westlock had with any other person but herself.

She was faint with weariness when she went home. She ate some supper and made up a bed for herself in Mrs. Kent's room. Annie, the nurse said, was sleeping under opiates. Elizabeth went at once to bed and slept for twelve hours. She awoke in the early morning, refreshed, alive and well. The nurse was astir and the two women talked together over the preparation and eating of breakfast. Annie woke and called.

"I lost my baby!" Annie said at once, as Elizabeth stooped over her and kissed her.

"Yes—I'm so sorry. It was so terrible, Annie—all that suffering and then no baby."

"I guess it's best. What would a kid want of me?" asked Annie, her old bravado sadly crumpled.

"We're going to have the funeral this afternoon," said Elizabeth. "I sent word to Ole and asked him to bring his team in. We'll have a service here in the house and Ole will take the baby out to the farm and put it under the trees by the lake."

"I'll bet Ole won't. Your aunt'll turn over in her grave to think my ill-gotten son is lying on the land."

Elizabeth put her hand over the other's mouth and smiled and shook her head. Two tears were in her eyes.

"Ole will do whatever I tell him," she said with sudden authority, "and however Auntie felt, I know she feels differently now. She changed before she died. There ought to be a baby on that old farm, and Ole will mind me. You watch and see if he doesn't come this afternoon. I'm going to quit work this Saturday, so I don't care what Mr. Westlock thinks. I'll come home early and the doctor will be here. I've got work to do now and don't you fret about anything."

"What are you quitting your good job for?" asked Annie suspiciously. "I'll bet that dried up old Ooley fired you—for having me here."

"Mr. Ooley's away," said Elizabeth. "He's gone to Illinois. I dare say Mr. Westlock knows nothing whatever about you or me either. No, Aunt Jane left a little money to me and I'm going to take a holiday. You know how hard I've worked—I'm going to quit and rest and make some pretty dresses. I'll never be tall and lovely like you are, but I might as well do the best I can for myself."

Annie let the compliment pass. Her brown eyes, wide now in the white face, questioned the little figure steadily, but saw no misgivings.

"You couldn't tell a straight lie, so I'll believe you. You'll be here then, next week?"

"Yes, Annie. I've got to go now. You rest and don't worry," she commanded again, and Annie allowed herself a sardonic smile in answer to this.

In view of her dismissal, Mr. Westlock could not object to Elizabeth's taking the afternoon off. She felt,

as she walked home, her arms full of flowers bought on High Street, that all her life was being disorganized. Years of steady work, day in, day out, were dissolving into random adventure. Ole was at the house when she got there, sitting in the parlor, his hands twisted in embarrassment as he looked at the tiny box the nurse had prepared, a little old packing-case, with a bit of silk tacked over it and lined with down. Ole was dreadfully embarrassed by the arrival of Elizabeth, but Elizabeth was clear-eyed and unafraid. She had passed through and out of the sham modesty which so ruled her generation.

"Ole," she said to him, "Annie's had a bad time of it. Mr. Mock was already married when he promised to marry her, and she's had a baby now and lost it. She's not got any friends, or any money, and she's going to stay here a little while and then I don't know what she'll do. I know you've never liked Annie, but I want you to hide that and be gentle with her to-day, because she's been unfortunate and she's dreadfully unhappy."

Ole, his eyes gleaming in his great red face, watched the small lecturing figure. It seemed like old days on the farm, when the pygmy Elizabeth had bossed and scolded the giant Ole. It was true, he would do anything for her. She told him what she wanted him to do—to take the baby to the farm with him and bury it in some suitable spot. They'd got a man from the Salvation Army to come and direct the funeral service that afternoon, and the doctor had attended to the birth and death certificates and done all that was necessary. If Ole would take the little boy——

"Annie have a boy-baby?" asked Ole, with curiosity.

He was forgetting himself in the naturalness of these arrangements. There was even dimly in his maculinity admiration for the natural fertile woman.

The tears filled Elizabeth's eyes.

"Oh, Ole," she said, "Annie had such a hard time."

The man's shocked sense of the necessity of virtue in a woman vanished before those tears. Elizabeth's compassion filled him.

"Poor Annie! Poor Teacher!" he said, and gave a sigh. Elizabeth smiled at him, asked him to stay for luncheon and went back to the kitchen where she served lunch to the nurse and prepared something for Annie. Then she called Ole to the table.

The Salvation Army man came, at last, and the funeral was a meager affair with only Ole and Elizabeth, the impatient doctor and the nurse.

Afterward Annie asked for Ole, and he went in to her, his feet leaden with embarrassment. She looked quite young, lying on Elizabeth's pillow, her face thinned and fine, her hair in a braid—very clean and sweet, and the lingering memory of pain in her dark eyes was like a recurrence of innocence.

"I just wanted to say thanks, Ole. You're kind and good. Ole, do you remember, years ago—on the farm?"

He remembered. He blushed vividly and moved uncomfortably.

"I only wanted to say, Ole—I'm sorry I was so mean. I've always been sorry, but I never could say so, before. But now, I can't bear to let that old unkindness stand."

"Ole knows, Teacher. You should been mine wife. I was man for you, that day. I take good care for you. None of these terrible times, but only nice boy baby, born by the house."

"Yes." She closed her eyes, then opened them and looked at him fairly. "It's what I was meant for, Ole—a hard life with hard work and a man that could master me, but I wouldn't believe it. I wanted to be a fine lady—" Her face suddenly crumpled up, and the hot, terrible tears that she had withheld so long poured from her eyes, fell on the pillow, and she was half-strangled with sobs. She held the cover against her mouth but did not try to wipe the tears away. Ole looked desperately about him. He took a small clean towel from the wash-stand, and went to the bedside and wiped those tears away and patted that hot flushed cheek.

"I'm a dirty man to come by such a clean lady," he joked her, and there were tears in his own eyes, and he grinned and choked, and Annie smiled at him while she was crying and then turned her face away.

"Ole," she whispered, "you know where I threw those asters, that day? Ole, will you put my boy there, in the yard? You're good and kind—too good now, for Annie. I'll thank you some other time. Now, I'm tired."

"Sure, Teacher," he whispered, "sure. I do whatever you say." He looked down at himself with sudden disgust, with sex vanity that his long devotion to Elizabeth had never stirred. "I buy myself nice new clothes and take a bath. I dress up every day like for garden party last year. You remember, Teacher, that day by the farm, I could not speak Inglish like I can now, but I go in lake and make myself clean to be Teacher's feller? I got money on my belt, that day—many hundred dollars gold, to show you. Now, I'm old man, but never change."

She did not answer, and he tiptoed to the door, the

clean towel still in his work-coarsened hand—a little linen towel, wet with Magdalene's tears. He put it covertly into the pocket of his coat.

"I come back, Teacher, and tell you about baby—You feel better then, I show you my new clothes."

"Thanks, Ole."

He closed the door behind him, shouldered the little box gently and laid it carefully in the wagon-bed.

"I see these feller, Mock, I punch him good!" He clenched his great fist that would have felled an ox and brandished it at Elizabeth.

"Teacher my girl, long ago. Ole never forgot her."

Elizabeth saw, with some misgivings, that she had made Ole a champion of Annie's. A champion, indeed, that was to last throughout Annie's life and was to bring her into the safe harbor of married respectability, while Teacher would gain a pupil who was devoted slave, lord and master.

Years later, seeing Ole, tidy and well-spoken, on the streets of Waynesville, Elizabeth remembered the old Ole and realized how little she would ever have been able to do for him, compared with what Annie had done.

CHAPTER XXXI

It was Elizabeth's last day at work. A young man who had been in the county clerk's office was to take her place, and she showed him her neat books and tidy records. He was a condescending young fellow, but he could hardly conceal a certain bright interest in Elizabeth, who had managed to become a public character. The smooth brown braids on the shapely head, the clear deep eyes, the gentle mouth, were so different from what he had expected. And this was the little girl Mr. Ooley was reputed to have been so in love with! He had heard a saw salesman talk all evening about her once, in a down-town hotel. He felt a stirring of his pulses as men must feel toward a woman who has conquered other men. There must be some mysterious attraction here that he could not comprehend. The gentle voice interested him far more than the work.

Toward noon he went out on an errand for Mr. Westlock. The boss went, too, and Elizabeth was alone in the office. She looked about her, wondering why she did not feel badly about going, but it was true that she cared little. The place had never been the same since Sam Ooley had left it. There was only one reason why Elizabeth hated to leave. It was because of her meetings with Jim, here.

She could see him again, standing beside her desk,

see the look of deep self-hatred in his eyes at her own sudden tears. She felt his struggle, his strength, his magnetism. Standing by her desk lost in dreams, she was again the little girl struggling through the ice-encrusted snow, her heart heavy with loneliness, then happy at finding a friend.

He had opened all the doors of life for her. He had brought her near to her aunt, had given her her only doll, had brought her close to Annie. He had saved their wheat crop and found her work. The only party she had ever gone to had been brightened to a flaming success by him. How could she ever have dreamed of marrying Mr. Ooley, she wondered, when Jim stood like a beacon light on every high place of her life. All the bright colors of his manhood, the noise and shout of his laughter, the whimsical frivolity of his manner, the self-contempt of his bad habits and the arrogance that ran through all, had dominated her imagination. No matter how casual their meetings, he had always been at once in the center and heart of her understanding. There had never been the need for a preliminary skirmish between them.

"Jim, Jim!" she whispered, and so clearly had her long and lonely adoration brought him to her thoughts that she stared, unbelieving, at his actual presence before her. His brows were drawn down straight over gleaming eyes, his mouth, that should have been strong and was so childlike, showed only a stubborn fold.

Elizabeth put out her hand and touched him, and laughed a little, nervously.

"I didn't know you were real. I was thinking about you so hard."

He did not smile, but his look changed a little. Some of the severity left his face, and his eyes were pleading. A touch of fear chilled Elizabeth.

"What's wrong, Jim?"

"Don't you know why I've come?" he accused her. "You asked me to come back to you—again."

She understood. She understood, now, too, the antagonism he could hardly conceal. He had kept his promise to come to her when the thirst came on him, but he did not thank her for it, now. He was at war with her.

Elizabeth took her sailor hat and set it on her crown of braids.

"Let's go," she said. "I'm through here."

"You don't want to go out with me," he told her. "There's no use trying to do anything for me. No use worrying about me. I told you I'd come back, and I came. Now, I'll go."

"I'll go with you," she said, with unexpected firmness. He made no answer, but walked out of the office, down the steps and along High Street. Elizabeth walked at his side. There was no way he could prevent her.

"Did you know my aunt died, Jim?" she asked him, breathlessly, for his long strides carried him faster than she could well walk. He checked his speed with instinctive courtesy and waited for her.

"I only knew it yesterday," he said to her. "Hal came in from the East, and he told me. I haven't been reading the paper. I'm sorry. It leaves you all alone, doesn't it?"

She was grateful for something to talk about and told him the circumstances of her aunt's death. He was

inattentive, however, and it was not until she began to talk of Annie Smail that she felt he was listening.

"Is that why you're through at the warehouse?" he asked. "You ought not to do such things, Elizabeth. You'll have to watch out for your own interests more. You need some one to take care of you."

Elizabeth laid her hand inside his arm and looked up at him, her heart in her clear blue eyes.

"Yes, Jim," she said softly, "I do. I need some one to take care of me. Annie will soon be well, and then I suppose she'll find work somehow."

She fell silent. He was frowning now. She felt a tremor of pure nervousness in the arm to which she clung. He began to walk rapidly again. She clung to him and let him carry her along. She felt strength welling and playing in him—a vast energy and impatience. He seemed hardly able to control his gait, his gestures, his nervous frowning. She was filled with an instinct to cling to him, no matter what befell her. It was all that she knew how to do.

They walked the full length of High Street, and then turned back again. Jim went into a side street that led down to the river bridge, and Elizabeth walked at his side, her little feet barely touching the pavement at times. They came to the bridge and stopped for a moment to look down on the barges of coal lying there. Elizabeth could see the red tin roof of the railroad restaurant, the square tops of the buildings on High Street and, on the slope above, Thorne's great house in its gardens, and the myriad of small houses on the south slope where her own house stood.

"You'd better go back from here," Jim said to her.

"I'm going on over into Mining Town, and it's no place for a girl like you."

"I'll be all right with you," she answered.

His impatience could not be concealed.

"It's time for you to go home to your lunch," he told her. "I've got to see a man, over here——"

"Let me go with you. I've never been to the mines."

"I'll take you some other day, when I'm not so busy."

She did not answer, but held to his arm.

"You're going?" he asked at last, as though he could not believe her so insensitive. And then something about the whole argument struck him as funny, and he laughed and turned back with her. His merriment, which was rather hysterical, lasted until they got back to High Street. He took her to lunch with him in a little café near the courthouse, which she thought was very grand. She felt intensely relieved that he had not gone to the mines. She knew what he wanted in Mining Town as well as he did. There was a whole street there given over to the illicit sale of whisky, and while it could be bought easily enough right in town, the gentlemen of Coal City went to the mines when they wished to throw off all restraint. One's degradation was less likely to be witnessed by people who might matter.

After lunch, during which Jim was constrained and silent and without appetite, they went out into the street again. Handbills were displayed on a board fence, advertising a minstrel show at the opera house. Jim looked down at her, the same patient kindness on his bold features that she had seen the day he had argued so reasonably with Mr. Ooley for an extension of credit—had been able to control his own resentment, so that he might not be delayed.

"Would you like to go to see a show, Elizabeth? We can get tickets. I think it would be all right for you to go with me in the afternoon."

"Oh, Jim! would you take me?"

He nodded and led her to the square brick opera house, and they bought tickets and went inside.

Elizabeth had never been in a theater, and the clumsy place, with its square raised stage, its glaring lights, its huge red curtains, impressed her tremendously. Soon the show began. The black-faced comedians joked and sang, and Elizabeth went into gales of laughter at the nonsense of the interlocutor with his huge mouth and rolling eyes. The singing thrilled her, the husky, deep voices, emotional, exciting.

She laughed joyously, her hand held tight in Jim's. His eyes were on her more than on the play. She looked up at him once to share her delight, but she saw, with a shock of remembrance, a nervous awareness in his face. He was waiting—biding his time against her.

She was quieter during the last of the performance, and if he was waiting for release from her presence, she began to wait, too. Resolution formed behind the slim face that would have startled him. He had found himself incapable of unkindness to her—she was so little, so young, and he had found that he could neither cast her off nor take her with him. Vexed with himself for ever having come to her now, he was none the less compelled by his deep innate chivalry to protect her against himself. Her weakness demanded certain things of his strength. It would only be a little while, he reassured his growing torment, until he got her safely home.

But getting her safely home was not so easy. She

took him in and introduced him to the nurse and asked him to go in to talk to Annie. He and Annie looked at each other with understanding.

"Elizabeth says you've had a bad time, Annie."

"Yeah—" she answered. She was propped up on her pillows, eating from a tray placed by the bed. "It would have been a lot worse but for her. I'd have been in the river. That's where I belong, I guess. Funny thing to me is how a girl like Elizabeth ever came across me—or you, either."

"I want to get away," Jim confided in a low voice. "But she's preparing supper for me. I'm not hungry."

"But you're thirsty," said Annie with discernment, and at her words the quick hot color flamed on his face.

"Am I such a notorious drunkard, then?"

Annie smiled at him. Judging others was far from her these days.

"Well, you sort of light the town now and then. These periodical sprees of yours are about the worst there are, Jim."

He would not talk about it and got up and returned to the kitchen. Elizabeth had put biscuits in the oven. She was telling the nurse about the minstrel show. Nurse was disapproving, but silent. She went back to her patient and left Jim and Elizabeth alone. Elizabeth set the table and lifted her supper, but Jim did not eat. She had made coffee—fresh and strong, and he drank a little of it, but excused himself for not touching the food she put before him. Elizabeth ignored his lack of appetite. After supper she stacked the dishes quickly, then went and got her doll and showed it to him. Jim had found his hat.

"I think I'll be going along. I'll see you again, Elizabeth."

"Oh, don't go, Jim. Please stay the evening out. I'd hoped you'd stay all night. I've an extra room, now that Mrs. Kent's gone. The nurse sleeps in Annie's room."

"Stay all night?" he said in astonishment. "I wouldn't think of it—wouldn't think of giving you the trouble."

He stayed, however. He never let go of his hat. Several times he got up—even put his hat on, but somehow, by her gentle persuasion, by his inability to strike openly at her defenselessness, he found he had spent a long, confused evening with her. She had chattered brightly and steadily. He had not listened. He was aware of long, involved confidences, but he made no sense of her revelations. He began, however, as the hours went by, to experience a nameless fear. They were at war, these two, but war had not been openly declared between them. They were still circling the skirts of it in an assumption of polite normal relationship. But the girl was a clinging limpet who was not going to let him go. He realized it, with a sudden breaking up, through the crust of his self-control, of his thirst, which had become terrible. He had not eaten all day. His throat burned. His nerves cried out at him.

"If I'm going to stay, I'll go to bed," he said, and got up and left her side abruptly. Elizabeth showed him his room. She was sorry he had no things with him, but some of Uncle Hiram's were in the bureau. He might be comfortable. She would call him in the morning.

"You go to bed, now. I've kept you up," he said, with thinly veiled hostility. He went into the room and shut the door and waited for the house to grow quiet.

He could hear Elizabeth moving about in the kitchen, washing her stacked dishes. He waited, smarting with the ignominy of his position. He, Jim Younger, a man with a reputation all over the state for his strong masculinity, his popularity, his fashionable dress and fast horses. Here he sat like a fool, imprisoned, practically, by a silly girl. And then some glimpse came to him.

"She thinks she can save me," he said.

He laughed a dreadful laugh from his hurting throat. The idea of the little Elizabeth, so meek and good, so immaculate and gentle, so starved for the pleasures of life, setting herself up to do battle with the monster that clawed him, seemed so ridiculous to him that he felt his laughter stuttering into nervous giggling.

"Hell," he said, and wiped the sweat off his face with his handkerchief. "I wish she could. I wish she could. I might be a man, and give her a hand at it. I might try to help her."

But he felt a weariness and futility in such utterances. He had set himself again and again against his appetite, but the worst of it was, when he was sober he didn't want to drink, and when the craving came on him, he didn't want to be saved from himself. He wanted only solitude and the privilege of drinking himself under the table—a task that was not so easy as formerly, as his resistance to hard liquor had increased with the years—the hard-working, patient, ingenious human frame adjusting itself to such malpractise.

This privilege had now become the necessity of his life. The house had grown still, and Jim, feeling a sudden nervous release in the nearness of his freedom, got up, tiptoed to the door and opened it cautiously.

A candle burned on Mrs. Kent's old sewing-table, and on a stool beside it sat Elizabeth. She had changed her dress to a housedress with a low neck, loose and comfortable, and her shoes to slippers, and the great braids hung over her shoulders. She was sitting on the stool, dozing, nodding, her big gray cat on her lap, her hand upon its back. Feeling his astonished stare, she roused, looked at him and smiled.

"Do you want anything, Jim?" she asked gently.

He closed the door without answering and stood inside of it, shaken and disturbed.

She was keeping a vigil!

He went back and sat down upon the bed to consider this. It meant he would have to go out and thrust past her, tell her that he must simply go and drink himself to death. He had, in prescience, from the bitterness of long and tragic experience, some inkling of the self-loathing that would follow such treatment of the weak and helpless. It had been his creed to be kind to all that was frail and gentle. He had never in his life mistreated an animal. Some sweet humility of soul, that strange spiritual compensation that comes to the man or woman of evil habits, had set him down in his own estimation and had so shown him the sufferings of others that he found himself again and again incapable of unkindness, except for the excited nervous quarrelsomeness that ruled him when he was drunk.

He sat a long time, shamed, tormented, lonely. He wanted to go out, and he wanted Elizabeth to stay near him. A faint spark of hope stirred in his breast as he thought of her. But it passed, and he looked about, saw the window, and gently, carefully, lifted it. There were

no weights—the window would have to be propped open. He looked about him but could see nothing. He let it down again, and looked about the room for something to hold the sash up. He saw only a small stool which could be tipped on end, but would not leave room for his body. He looked in the clothes-closet. There was an umbrella there. It was too long. So Jim opened the window, thrust a leg over the sill, let the window come down on the back of his neck while he tried to get his other leg across.

Straddling the sill thus, he was aware of some one in the garden. There was a figure there, like a pale small ghost. He twisted his head a little to see better, and there among the flowers in a border beneath the window, stood Elizabeth. She was smiling a little tremulously, but she said nothing, just stood and watched him.

A murderous impulse flared in Jim—a flame of fierce anger, so that he could have smitten her down where she stood. Indeed, he half-lifted a clenched fist from the sill where he clung and made a menacing gesture at her. She shrank back a little, but did not speak or move. Jim's arm fell when she winced, and he saw himself as at the wrong end of a telescope—lifting his fist against a woman.

"You win," he said to her in a choked voice. "Go back to bed. I'm sorry. I'll stay till morning."

CHAPTER XXXII

ELIZABETH slipped away, back to the front door, and Jim went back to the bedroom, leaving the window open a crack at the bottom, undressed and went to bed. He lay there in the dark, wondering at himself. The kid was so darn innocent, he thought. She expected him to treat her right. How was he ever to get away from her? He was sick now, sick and trembling. Such bitter warfare waged within him that he could only lie inert, helpless. Toward morning he fell at last into a kind of troubled sleep from which he awoke to the sound of Elizabeth stirring in the kitchen and to the smell of coffee.

He lay for a moment bewildered, looking about him. Elizabeth had removed her own possessions into this room with the advent of the nurse. The closet door was partly open and he caught a glimpse of dresses and garments hanging within. The best bureau was in this room and on it were her toilet articles, a photograph or two, and, stuck in the mirror, the little old picture of himself. He got up with curiosity and looked at it—a boy's face, with slicked-up hair and wide eyes. He looked into the mirror at his face, not so much changed as it should be, he thought, older, of course, and bolder, too, and with something gone out of it——

Why should he care any longer what happened to him? What chance had he ever had to be anything but

what he was? And why, more mysterious still, should Elizabeth care?

He dressed, but could not shave himself. In the kitchen he washed his face and hands and sat down at the table. Elizabeth, who had greeted him with a silent smile, placed the breakfast on the table, and they sat down together. He could not eat, but took the coffee she gave him, hot and black, and burned his throat with it.

The nurse and Annie were not yet astir. Jim and Elizabeth were quiet, seemingly drawn together in some morning sorrow and sympathy. He noticed with vexation that she was pale and heavy-eyed. She ate her breakfast and was revived perceptibly by the hot food. He watched her, trying to plan out what he could say to her. She set her empty cup lightly on its saucer, and smiled at him.

"It's no good, Elizabeth," he said at last, when she began to speak of plans for the day as though he were a week-end visitor and had to be entertained. "It's no good your trying for me. I appreciate it, but I can't hold out. You'll have to let me go." His candor, his determined gentleness, the suffering in his dark eyes and the nervous twitching of his hands, brought tears to her eyes.

"Do you think I would let you go—so easily, Jim?"

"Easily!" he cried.

"Why, yes, easily. That's what I said."

"But you don't understand," he protested, "you don't know what I'm going through. You don't know what you're asking of me. And why? Why should you care? What obligation am I under to let you hold to me like this? What affair is it of yours after all, Elizabeth?"

"You see, Jim," she told him gently, "I've always cared so much what happened to you. You've been everything to me."

She paused, faced with the impossibility of telling him what he had been to her, what he was to her now. It was a thing she could not tell him, could only show in what she did.

"I guess I'm in love with you. Mr. Ooley wanted me to marry him, and I might have done it, if it hadn't been for the way I felt about you. So, in a way—you're responsible. Not that I'd reproach you for that. It's just that I've got to hold on to you. You're all I have."

His amazement made him forget, for the moment, his discomfort. He had seen coyness, boldness, coquetry, but this simple unadorned admission shocked him.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he told her roughly. "You don't know anything about love. You're only a baby, only a little girl that ought to be playing with dolls."

There was no use trying to answer such a ridiculous statement. He floundered about in the sea of her avowal. It was a complication he did not welcome.

"Anyhow," he said, "it's all news to me. You've been a sort of little sister—but I'd never be fool enough to let myself think of a girl like you. I'm not fit."

"That's not my fault. I've nothing to do with that," she answered, with a show of spirit. Jim flushed, took up his hat and held it firmly, as though he expected her to take it from him.

He stood uncertainly by the breakfast-table.

"It's not exactly true, what I said," he muttered. "I've thought about you a good deal—one time or another.

Last year—I'd have been a suitor, if your aunt hadn't put me in my place. But I'm not the man for you—little Elizabeth."

"Aunt Jane felt differently about you before she died," said Elizabeth, and flushed, as this seemed very bold. She got up and got her hat. She wore a white summer dress that Mrs. Kent had made her before Annie came back. She had a new white leghorn to go with it. She put on the hat, drawing it down low over her face, and took her clean handkerchief and little purse, to join him. Her cheeks were bright with color and there were twin stars in her eyes—tears perhaps, a bright glitter.

"Let's walk down to the park and see the new swans the city has bought for the lagoon," she invited him.

He followed her to the street, and they walked along slowly. He was still seeking, rather hopelessly, for a way of escape. But the fierceness of his first passionate impatience was gone. As they walked, he seemed to be considering what she had said, and when they came to the square of park and leaned on a stone hill to watch the gliding swans, he touched her hand. His fingers found hers cool and smooth and closed about them tightly.

"Elizabeth," he said to her, "I'm on your side, now. If you'll stick by me to-day—if you'll forgive me whatever happens and stay with me, I'll be all right, to-night or to-morrow, and another time will never be so difficult. But I can't do it alone. I daren't say to you what I'm thinking—all that's been in my heart for some time. You should never have told me what you did back there. It makes it harder for me to bear my lot. It makes me—ashamed!"

She laughed a little.

"You're all right, Jim. You're going to be fine. Of course I'll stay with you. I intended to, and now that you've asked me, I wouldn't be driven away. Let's not talk about it any more. Let's walk about a while, then get your horse and drive out into the country a way and go back to my house for supper."

She began to chatter about Coal City, about her plans now for a real rest and vacation for herself—the clothes she would buy. Did he think a green-silk dress would be nice for her, or would she look better in blue? Auntie had asked her not to wear mourning.

He did not even pretend to listen, his strained attention being turned upon himself. They walked through the graveled paths, hands clinging together.

Elizabeth never forgot that day. It was years in passing. The brief respite of the morning soon yielded to a dark cloud that spread and engulfed them. There slowly developed in Jim a dreadful burning anger and frustration which turned itself inevitably against her.

They did not get the horse, did not eat lunch, for the hours passed in a confusion of endless pain. Jim, forgetting his resolutions, his plea, became obsessed with a desire to wound her. Since he could not by some queer quirk in his better nature, simply walk off from her, he sought to force her by the very insolence of his attitude, to dismiss him. Years afterward, Elizabeth's face would burn at the memory of his cruelty.

By midafternoon they were sitting in misery, clinging to each other, Elizabeth pale and unhappy, but stubbornly standing by what she had begun. All the purpose of the years seemed gathered in this conflict. She knew that a part of him was on her side—that all the Jim she

loved would help her. And for the dark demon—it was *that,* not Jim, which struck at her so furiously. A half-dozen times he got up, but never let go of her, never left her. Her dominance now equaled the dominance of his appetite, and between them he was torn asunder. But Elizabeth would not be hurt, would not leave him. She was sustained by an inward power. She was stronger every hour, she grew more fearless as the struggle progressed, more certain of the rightness, the inevitability of victory. And yet, at the same time, all that was left of the little girl in her suffered exquisitely.

Once they rose, by common consent, and walked a long way and came back to the little park again, in silence. It seemed to Elizabeth that they were walking in dreadful darkness, so real, so tangible had become the thing with which they contended. She could no longer think, plan or pray. She could only cling with desperate purpose.

He suffered, and she suffered with him. He cursed her, and she only looked at him. She was very pale. Even his fever fell before her clear deep eyes. He looked off among the trees, his face scarred with a tragic realization of what he had said to her, his darling.

The lamp-lighter ran past them with his flaming stick and touched the square lamps on their iron posts along the parkway. They realized that the late summer dusk had fallen.

"Aren't you hungry?" Jim asked at last.

"Yes," she said faintly. "But I don't want to go home nor down High Street. Let's go down to Stuart's place. It's right down this street."

They walked down the hill. Elizabeth's body felt

strangely light and giddy. She could not tell what it was that kept her drifting in the right direction, as she had no control over her limbs. They came into the low, long building by the tracks and sat down at the very table where Elizabeth had seen Jim, two years ago, with Mrs. Thorne.

Jo, the counter boy, came, and Elizabeth ordered for both of them. The boy put a bowl of fruit on the table and went to the kitchen. There were peaches in the dish, and Jim, who had not eaten a thing for three days, reached out, took one and broke it open and began to eat. Elizabeth watched him breathlessly as he finished the peach, put the stone on the empty plate before him and reached for another. He sat there not knowing what he was doing, talking to her in a desultory way, and he finished three peaches before the counter boy set their supper before him.

"Why, I'm hungry," Jim said, in amazement.

"Yes," said Elizabeth, and smiled at him. But there was a wan look about her—a look of great fatigue.

Neither of them spoke again until his empty dishes were being taken away. She had not eaten. A tide of reaction was swelling and rising in her, choking her, shaking her, threatening her. She could hardly bear the sight of Jim sitting there, eating with such natural healing hunger. All the rejoicing that should have been hers was gone. They left the restaurant at last, and Elizabeth was conscious of Mr. Stuart standing with his hands on the hips of his clean white apron, staring after them.

The way up the hill grew increasingly difficult for her. Jim walked strongly now, his step light, her hand tight in his own. He carried it as something too precious

to let go, not as a rope to which the drowning cling. He seemed full of profound thought, thinking so intently she could almost hear his thoughts. His astonishment, his incredulity, at this calm conclusion to his periodic season of debauch, grew and filled him as they walked, so that he was beyond speech. But he knew that as long as he lived, he would never fear himself again. He would never find the old enemy too powerful. What had been done once, could well be done again!

"I simply can't believe it!" he exclaimed at last.

"You'll have to walk more slowly. I'm tired," she answered.

He stopped instantly and looked at her with such tenderness that it filled her with a happy glow. It was the look she had long pictured in his eyes, had long awaited—that look of tender recognition for the place she should fill for him. He put a hand under her arm, and she leaned upon him, and they walked silently up the long hill. At her door, she paused and turned to say good night to him.

"I'll come in with you—" he said, "I want to talk to you."

A flame of resentment such as she had never felt in her life at anybody, burned up in her.

"Jim Younger," she said to him, "I never want to see you again, never want to talk to you again. There's nothing for us to say to each other after to-day. It's finished."

"Finished!" he cried, "why, it's only just begun. Why, Elizabeth—you're heart of my heart—you're—" but he stopped, disconcerted, for she had gone inside and shut the door, and he heard, distinctly, the turn of the key

in the lock. He stood on the path by the little step, disconcerted, uncertain. He wanted to shout her name, but somehow did not dare.

He tried to remember what he had said to her that afternoon—that morning—the night before, when he had threatened her, but it was all lost in confusion like the nightmares of delirium. But a feeling of shame, of strong self-distrust, shook him to the very foundations of his being.

"Poor little thing—so young—and weak—"

The words, whispered softly, sentimentally, came back to him in mockery. "Weak and unprotected—" he repeated his whisper, and with a start of nervousness, he seemed almost to hear the laughter of his own defeated obsession.

"Why! She's a tower," he said in amazement. "She's a tower of strength."

He remembered with what amusement he had first sensed her intention to defeat the purpose of his trip to town. Her slender girlhood pitted against his demon! It had been ridiculous, yet now it was accomplished. He saw the tenacity with which she had clung to him, the vigilance with which she had circumvented him, the incredible endurance with which she had borne with him. She had taken what he had to say—she had stood, when he lifted his hand to strike her——

Not a sound came from the small closed house. He could see the windows of the room where he had spent the night—her room. She had taken her life in her hands to have him there.

"A tower of strength," he said in a low voice, but the words were illumined in his mind like words set on a

high hill. "She's invincible. She's indestructible, or I would have destroyed her. She's not little and young at all, but she's the very embodiment of courage—"

Elizabeth, the good little Elizabeth, he saw as in a vision—a high tower, on a high hill. Her tender heart was a bulwark, her young brows a turret, and on the turret burned a clear white light. He saw all the weak and broken crawling to this tower, escaping from their enemies, running to her for protection. There was Aunt Jane, old and feeble, hiding secure. There was Mr. Ooley, dried and dead, finding life and warmth again. Ole, made into a good citizen, Annie Smail, broken by her vanities and passions, finding retreat and safety, and even Loreen Thorne—Hal had told him about that.

And himself! He was, by a miracle, freed from one of earth's most dreadful slaveries—not by laws or by restrictions, but by love. The first bonds had been stricken away—the rest he could accomplish alone.

What a woman—surrounded and shielded by the immortal rocks of all that was good and brave! And he had thought in his simplicity that he had only to reach out and take her! He was abased. He was compelled, by a deep humility, to go down on his knees in her little garden. The vision he had of her, a vision she would never be able to see of herself, was to stay with him through life, to be his light, his succor.

He prayed, feeling blindly out toward the sources of her power. He could find no words, only a great need.

"Love me—love me, little Elizabeth!"

The long night passed, and the vigil now was his. In the first light of morning he went humbly away, careful lest the faintest breath of gossip touch her.

Elizabeth woke late. It was Monday, and she had no job to take her forth! She lay in some delicious happiness that she could not at once discover. Something wonderful was to happen to her. Then she remembered and turned on her pillow, looking through the open window at a little bird singing on a swaying branch.

She would have nothing to do all day but go down High Street and look at dresses. Would she get a green dress or a blue one? Jim hadn't said which he liked. It didn't matter. He would henceforth and forever more like anything she chose to wear, when he learned she had already forgiven him—while she was sleeping.

It was really a lovely day. She had so much money—almost a thousand dollars. She could have a dozen silk dresses if she wanted them. Annie was going out to the country as soon as she was able to keep house for Ole and an immigrant aunt of his.

She slipped out of bed and ran to the mirror. She unbraided her hair and brushed it with long lovely sweeps of her round white arms. And as she brushed it, she began to sing.

THE END